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ABSTRACT

These 11 newsletter issues provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas regarding mixed-age grouping in preschool and elementary schools. The October 1992 issue focuses on the mixed-age approach as an educational innovation, defines relevant terms, and presents advice from Oregon teachers on teaching mixed-age groups. The March 1993 issue discusses: how children learn to care for the needs of others; preparing the environment for mixed-age grouping; and communicating with parents and visitors. a Multi-Age Classroom Observation Guide is also presented. The October 1993 issue discusses applying Piagetian theory to the mixed-age classroom; identifies the support needed to institutionalize mixed-age primary level classes; provides cautions for caregivers of mixed-age groups; and discusses use of parent workshops on the whole-language multi-age classroom. The Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter 1994 issues address student assessment in mixed-age classrooms and highlight the approach taken in individual programs. The Spring/Summer 1995 issue discusses implementing the mixed-age classroom and the benefits of mixed-age grouping. The Fall/Winter 1995 issue introduces the concept of looping and its advantages and disadvantages. The Spring/Summer 1996 issue focuses on using mixed-age grouping for at-risk students. The Fall/Winter 1996 issue examines how mixed-age grouping helps children develop social skills and a sense of belonging, and the potential risks of mixed-age grouping. The Spring/Summer 1997 issue deals with the risk of bullying in mixed-age groups. The Fall/Winter 1997 issue discusses sociodramatic play in the mixed-age setting. Regular features in most newsletter issues include "Quotable Quotes," relevant brief quotations regarding mixed-age groups; and descriptions of recent publications and other print and electronic resources. (KB)

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Volume 1 Number 1 October 1992

The MAGnet Newsletter

On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

ED 417 841

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The MAGnet is produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois, 805 W. Pennsylvania Ave., Urbana, Illinois 61801-4897.
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Diane McClellan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Mixed-Age Grouping and Education Reform

As we begin this newsletter on mixed-age grouping in preschool and elementary education, it may be useful to reflect on just where the mixed-age approach fits in the larger framework of educational innovation.

A friend of mine, a politician, said to me recently, "Those of us in politics would have more credibility and be more effective if 'civility' and 'modesty' were more central to our practice." Perhaps there is also power in this thought for those of us interested in educational innovation. In particular, I hope that in this newsletter we might practice modesty when making claims about mixed-age grouping as a key in education reform.

Recall, for example, the old story about the four blind men who approached an elephant for the first time; each approached the animal differently and each developed a different perspective on its nature, one stroking the elephant's tail, another its trunk, and so on. In such a manner, those of us interested in the benefits of classrooms of children of mixed ages have our hands on an important part of the elephant, but not the only part.

There is general agreement in the United States that we are not doing the best job of educating our children. In part as a response to this concern, a number of alternative approaches to educating children have sprung up—whole language, the project approach, cooperative learning, the integrated unit, etc. Each of these approaches has much to commend it, and each is valuable in highlighting important aspects of what I believe is, at its core, the same animal. We will here, from time to time, examine how such perspectives relate to mixed-age learning.

Mostly, however, we will focus on mixed-age grouping as a critical piece of the educational reform puzzle. It is a term and a concept which highlights a particular aspect of an alternative approach to the education of children: the mixing of diverse ages in classrooms, consciously, intentionally, and purposely. Its popularity and power as a teaching and learning strategy is evident as many states move to consider its adoption, particularly for teaching and learning in the early elementary school years.

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In this newsletter we will explore the advantages, problems, and strategies for implementation of mixed-age grouping in preschool and elementary education. We hope that ***The MAGnet*** will attract and support an extended conversation on mixed-age learning that will help us all gain a deeper understanding of the power that education holds for our children and for ourselves.

Diane E. McClellan
Loyola University Chicago

Some Definitions

A confusing variety of terms is used in discussions of the theoretical and practical issues surrounding multi-age grouping practices. Lilian Katz (*The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Education*, Katz et al., Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1990) differentiates among the following:

• *Nongraded* and *ungraded* typically refer to grouping children in classes without grade-level designations. In recent years, the purpose has usually been to group children homogeneously for instruction on the basis of ability and achievement level, regardless of age.

• *Combined grades* include more than one grade level in a classroom. Teaching and curriculum usually address the requirements for all included grade levels.

• *Continuous progress* generally implies that children stay with their peers in an age cohort regardless of meeting grade-level achievement expectations. The rationale for this practice is that separation from one's age cohort may stigmatize the child.

• *Mixed-age* or *multi-age grouping* refers to grouping children so that the age-span of the class is greater than one year. The purpose is to maximize the potential benefits of interaction and cooperation among children who vary in experience, maturity, and ability.

A new ERIC Digest elaborates on the definitions, implications, advantages and disadvantages of nongraded and mixed-age grouping. For a free copy, write to ERIC/EECE at 805 W. Pennsylvania Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, or call 217-333-1386.

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About *The MAGnet* Newsletter

The strength of any magnet is in its capacity to attract, to hold together, and to help point out the right direction. Hopefully, ***The MAGnet*** will bring together those interested in a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas on mixed-age grouping by sharing news about effective practices, meetings, and any pertinent publications. ***The MAGnet*** will help keep all of us posted on new developments related to mixed-age grouping in schools, school districts, U. S. states, and Canadian provinces.

Please send us information or questions on your experience with mixed-age grouping, announcements of meetings and new publications, or quotations relevant to multi-age group, nongraded, or integrated teaching.

We want to feature your questions or comments in future issues so that this newsletter becomes the basis for networking on mixed-age grouping practices. With any correspondence to ***The MAGnet***, be sure to include your address and a telephone number where you can be reached during the work day.

Ask the Principal*

Dear Principal: This year, for the first time, I will be teaching a combined class of fourth and fifth graders. If I don't organize reading groups by ability, how can I organize them?

There are lots of different ways to go about organizing reading groups. One teacher described several books to her class and let the students form groups to read the book they thought sounded most interesting. One of the girls who found oral reading very hard chose the group reading the most difficult novel. Yet she had a good experience!

Why did this work? The students did not expect that all of the members of the mixed-age group would have the same level of oral reading skill, and less skilled readers were not embarrassed. The teacher was able to change the focus of the group from oral reading skills to what each child had gotten from reading the novel. We have always known that some students who have the most difficulty with oral or silent reading are also the ones who have the best insights. It's rewarding to see children who don't think of themselves as good readers come to realize that they may understand a story at a different level from some of the most adept oral readers. Students become more willing to take risks.

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* *Address your questions to Mary Stitt, care of ERIC/EECE. Mary has over twenty years of experience as principal of the recently renamed Mary Stitt Olive Elementary School. This school has been providing mixed-age classrooms of exceptional quality since the early 1970s. Mary will also consult with experienced teachers in answering your questions.*

Quotable Quotes . . .

" . . . the nongraded school is no panacea . . . such a school makes the conduct of education no easier. But the process of nongrading lays bare long-standing educational problems. A compatibility between the nongraded structure and continuous pupil progress, longitudinal curriculum development, and integrated learning becomes obvious."

—*The Nongraded Elementary School*, John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

" . . . cross-age peer relations may serve various adaptive functions that are central to the process of cognitive and social development."

—"The Social Individual Model: Mixed-Age Socialization" by J. L. Roopnarine. In J. L. Roopnarine & J. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Approaches to Early Childhood Education*. Columbus, OH; Merrill, 1987.

"Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them."

—*The Case for Mixed Age Grouping in Early Education*, Lilian G. Katz, et al. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1990.

Readers: Submissions to this column of brief quotations that you think would be of interest to others are welcomed. Please send quotations to ***The MAGnet****, ERIC/EECE, 805 W. Pennsylvania, Urbana, IL 61801.*

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Oregon Teachers Offer Advice on Teaching Mixed-Age Groups

Many Oregon teachers are trying mixed-age grouping in their classrooms. A group of teachers enrolled in a three-day course at Portland State University (conducted by Lilian Katz) recently offered the following suggestions to teachers and administrators who are just beginning to implement mixed-age grouping:

Teacher 1: Expect to spend a lot of time in preparation for this new way of teaching. A lot of that time will be for talking, partly because this kind of teaching is often done in teams. We also seem to have more special meetings, conferences, and seminars now. And we have more to read: research reports, journal articles, descriptions of how this is being done in other places, etc. It's the philosophical issues that take up discussion time, because with mixed-age groups we have to change our ideas of what school is for.

" . . . with mixed-age groups we have to change our ideas of what school is for."

Teacher 2: Our new mixed-age classes seem to have more visitors than traditional classrooms. Many parents and people from other school districts want to see what we are doing. We have yet to figure out how to deal with so many visitors. It helps if an administrator will set up some procedures for showing visitors our classes.

Teacher 3: I teach a first and second grade "blended" class. The hardest thing for me to get used to was teaching without boundaries: no basal reader to follow, no mandated first grade curriculum guide, no milestones to be reached by certain times, and many more open-ended activities. What I do in my mixed-age class I do because of the children's needs and interests, not because they are first graders. I understand better now what it means to say that children grow at different rates, and the implications that has for teaching.

Teacher 4: When possible, I think teachers should be *invited* to participate in mixed-age grouping, and *not be forced* to take part. But this may result in a feeling of isolation, if, for example, only one or two teachers in the school are teaching mixed-age groups. Also, if feasible, it's better for parents to be able to choose this form of instruction for their child. Teachers need to talk with parents at a separate meeting and present their plans and views about mixed-age grouping, and ask parents to allow enough time to give this new kind of teaching a chance to work. If teachers can anticipate doubts and reservations that may come from some parents, they will be better able to help these parents understand the potential benefits of mixed-age grouping for their children.

Teacher 5: One interesting thing teachers new to mixed-age groups will learn is to trust and enjoy children's capabilities. Teachers of mixed-age groups learn to see individual children directly, instead of in terms of grade level. They also find out quickly that children want—and need—real responsibility. For example, a half-day kindergarten can be integrated into a first-grade class. First graders can take responsibility for making sure that the kindergartners are kept informed about what happened when they weren't there. The first graders come to see that this is a real responsibility, and an important one.

Recent Publications

Davis, Rodney. *The Nongraded Primary: Making Schools Fit Children.* Available from the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore St, Arlington, VA 22209-9988. Stock No. 21-00192, $2.50 plus $3.50 shipping and handling. Bulk discount rates available; call AASA at (703) 875-0731 for more information.

The first section of this new publication describes changes that result from implementation of the nongraded primary in the roles of school personnel, parents, and the community. A second section discusses the establishment of the nongraded primary.

DelForge, Clarence; and others. *Grouping Students and Helpful Suggestions for Combination Classrooms.* ED 343 749. 1991. 10p.

This report, drawing on data from a teacher survey, summarizes methods used by teachers to group students (grouping by level of student responsibility was the most common practice) and lists teaching strategies (curriculum integration was most common) for combination classrooms.

Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands. *Multilevel Grouping, Grades Preschool-5 Small and Rural Schools. Outstanding Teaching Practices Series, Vol. 4.* ED 343 735. 1991. 26p.

This volume offers profiles of nine teachers of mixed-age groups honored by the 1991-92 Teacher Recognition Program. Included are excerpts from their portfolios that discuss philosophy, describe programs and sample class activities, share evidence of impact, and briefly summarize their approaches.

Calkins, Trevor. "Off the Track: Children Thrive in Ungraded Primary Schools." *School Administrator* 49 (May, 1992):8-13. EJ 444 301.

Discusses ways that personalizing instruction and providing constructive feedback, two major goals of education reform, can be accomplished in mixed-age settings.

Gammage, Philip. "Changing Ideologies and Provision in Western Canadian Primary Education." *Comparative Education* 27 (1991): 311-323. EJ 444 054.

Compares recent policy changes in Alberta and British Columbia in preschool and primary education. Discusses the conflicts involved in a movement away from centrally imposed models of norm-referenced attainment to a more child-focused developmentally based curriculum in a flexible, nongraded setting.

Complete texts of ERIC documents (EDs) may be ordered from EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. References with an EJ (ERIC journal) number are available through the originating journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

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___ Yes! I'd like to contribute an article about our mixed-age grouping practices to this newsletter. Contact me at:
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On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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Volume 1 Number 2 March 1993

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Editor: Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago.

Q: How Do Children Learn to Care for the Needs of Others? A: By *Caring* for Others

Although we often think of children's social and emotional health as largely a result of their relationships with the influential adults (parents, relatives, teachers, etc.) in their lives, research makes a convincing case for the critical importance of children's relationships with one another to their future well-being (Parker and Asher, 1987).

Relationships with same-age peers found in formal groups of children (classrooms, Girl Scouts, Little League, etc.), however, are not the only kind that are important. Social and emotional development are enhanced, intellectual skills are learned, and dispositions of great importance are acquired when students have opportunities to relate to children older and younger than themselves (Hartup, 1983). Research shows, for example, that although same-age relationships appear to foster the development of playfulness and skill in aggressive or assertive behavior, relationships with younger children elicit greater rates of prosocial behaviors (sharing, cooperating, helping, nurturing) and leadership skills from older children.

The key to a person's capacity to behave prosocially, in other words, is the presence of multiple opportunities during childhood to care for and relate to younger children for whom the older child feels some responsibility (Whiting and Whiting, 1975). If children are not given the opportunity to practice caring for others and taking the interests of others into account through exposure to younger children, this capacity may remain underdeveloped. As Katz (1993) states:

> Older children's self-esteem is often enhanced by their clear sense of contributing to younger children when they read to them or help them in other ways. What is interesting about this point is that the help provided to "youngers" by "olders" is evident and obvious to them--not phony, rhetorical, or distant. Parents of olders may worry that their children will do all the

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giving, but the olders gain in self-esteem. Parents of youngers should be pleased to know that when their children are being aided by older children in the group, the youngers have a good model of nurturing behavior to emulate when their turn comes. The family-like composition of the mixed-age class makes such occurrences natural and functional rather than contrived.

Becoming responsive to the interests, needs, and thoughts of others takes years to develop and is at the heart of participation in the family, the workplace, and democracy. Children are not so different from adults in that they, too, need to make meaningful, authentic, nontrivial contributions to their environment and to the lives of others.

-- Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D.
Loyola University Chicago

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Hartup, W.W. (1983). Peer relations. In Mussen, Ed., *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (pp. 103-196). New York: Wiley.

Katz, L.G. (February 1993). Personal communication.

Parker, J.G., and S.R. Asher. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment: Are low-accepted children at risk? *Psychological Bulletin*, 102(3), 367-389.

Whiting, B.B., and J.W.M. Whiting. (1975). *Children of six cultures: A psycho-cultural analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

New Digests from ERIC/EECE

Three new digests, all of interest to educators of mixed-age groups, are available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education:

- *Reggio Emilia: Lessons for Early Childhood Educators*, by Rebecca New
- *Multiple Perspectives on Quality in Early Childhood Programs*, by Lilian G. Katz
- *Problem Solving in Early Childhood Classrooms*, by Joan Britz.

For copies of these ERIC Digests and a list of other new publications, contact ERIC/EECE (see back page for contact information).

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(_____)_____

Recent Publications on Mixed-Age Grouping

Ventura, Ellen, and others. (1993). A kindergarten through second grade multi-age classroom. Part I. *Insights into Open Education*, 25(5), 2-7. (Part II will describe the planning and implementation of the program.)

Gutierrez, R., and R.E. Slavin. (1992). Achievement effects of the nongraded elementary school: A best evidence synthesis. *Review of Education Research*, 62(4), 333-376.

Miller, B. (1992). *The Multigrade classroom: A resource handbook for small, rural schools* and *Training guide*. Both available from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204. (Handbook, $29.95; training guide, $11.30).

Non-Graded primary: Task force report. (1993). Available from: Oregon Department of Education, 700 Pringle Parkway SE, Salem Oregon, 97310-0290.

Roopnarine, J.L., and others. (1992). Social-cognitive play behaviors and playmate preferences in same-age and mixed-age classrooms over a 6-month period. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(4), 757-776.

Gaustad, J. (1992). Making the transition from graded to nongraded primary education. *OSSC Bulletin*, 35(8), 1-41. ED343282.

Gaustad, J. (1992). Nongraded education: Mixed-age, integrated, and developmentally appropriate education for primary children. *OSSC Bulletin*, 35(7), 1-37. ED343227.

Surbeck, E. (1992). Multi-age programs in primary grades: Are they educationally appropriate? *Childhood Education*, 69(1), 3-4.

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Quotable Quotes

Every way of grouping children has risks. Same-age grouping has many: the temptation to expect all classmates to be at the same place in learning, the greatly increased competitiveness among the children, and so forth . . . However, parents of the older and, therefore, somewhat more advanced children often worry that they will be 'pulled down' or kept behind by the younger ones. That is a real risk: but not just in mixed-age groups, in single-age groups as well!

Making sure that all children in a class are challenged is always a problem, no matter how students are grouped. Teachers struggle constantly to address this problem. With a mixed-age group, the teacher has to plan for all the children in terms of their individual progress, and because the teacher does not assume the students are at the same place (due to age), he or she is more likely to be aware of the need to offer challenging experiences for all the children. In other words, teaching mixed-age classes requires good teaching, just as any other way of grouping children does.

-- Lilian G. Katz, January 1993 newspaper interview

A multi-age class breaks down the structure of the traditional classroom and and . . . [provides] the time span needed for the sporadic growth found in children ages five through eight. Given this larger time span for development, [most] students will be ready for third grade and will not have to realize an extra year in school.

-- Ellen Ventura and others, p.4

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Preparing the Environment for Mixed-Age Grouping by Vita Bates

A carefully prepared environment which can strengthen and enrich children's learning is at the heart of every good early childhood curriculum. This is especially true of the environment for teaching mixed-age groups.

As I would like to define it, the prepared environment has: (1) a teacher who has faith in and understanding of the way children learn; (2) a room which has been thoughtfully arranged to empower the child to be in control of his or her own learning; (3) a schedule which provides individual children and groups of children with long work periods free from teacher- or schedule-generated interruptions; and (4) materials that are aesthetically appealing and which provide children with the opportunity to grow, succeed, explore, and create. This definition of the prepared environment is at the heart of the British Infant School, Montessori, High/Scope, and other teaching and learning strategies.

The prepared environment needs to be decentralized and allow for children to work individually or in small groups. Though a child-centered environment is not easy to implement, it is necessary so that children can make choices, invite players, develop rules, negotiate, and work cooperatively on projects to completion.

An important goal, often overlooked in early childhood classrooms, is the development of deep and prolonged play. When there is not enough time or opportunity for children to become deeply engaged in their activity, deep and prolonged play is less likely to develop. Some research indicates that children develop more complex and prolonged play in mixed-age groups. The educational goal of deep and prolonged play (which leads to skills critical to academics: concentration, attention to detail, mindfulness, etc.) is supported and strengthened by mixed-age grouping.

Vita Bates is assistant professor at Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, Illinois, and president of the South Suburban Association for the Education of Young Children.

The strength of any magnet is in its capacity to attract, to hold together, and to help point out the right direction. Write to us about *your* experiences teaching mixed-age groups. Share your ideas, concerns, and effective practices with other ***MAGnet*** readers.

Communicating with Parents and Visitors by Patti Hinkle and Bonnie Wall

The Barnwell Elementary School in Alpharetta, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, has two primary "MAC" (mixed-age classrooms) for grades one, two, and three, and one intermediate room for grades four and five, with 26 students in each classroom. Next year one primary and one intermediate class will be added. The MAC classes are offered as an alternative to traditional classrooms and serve a mixture of the school population.

In the first issue of ***The MAGnet***, the teachers from Oregon stated that multi-age classes seem to have more visitors than traditional classes. We at Barnwell find this to be true in our MAC classrooms. We have so many visitors, in fact, that we devised an information sheet that we give to visitors when they check in at the office. The *MAC Observation Guide* is included on the next page for ***MAGnet*** readers.

MAC Observation Guide

Welcome!

We appreciate your interest in the MAC class. Before you observe, please take a few minutes to read over this Introductory letter. We hope it will answer any questions you might have about the MAC class.

What Is MAC? A Multi-Age Classroom here at Barnwell is an alternative structure in which first, second, and third graders work together as a class. Children who enter in first grade have the opportunity to remain in the class for three years. The class has 26 children, and our goal is to have equal numbers of first, second, and third graders.

Bonnie Wall, who has extensive experience teaching multi-age Montessori classes, began teaching our first pilot class in 1991. Due to the success of our first year, we added a second class in 1992. Patti Hinkle, who has taught several different grade levels in Fulton County, and who is studying alternative approaches in education, is teaching our second class. An instructional assistant is assigned to each class.

Older students benefit from being leaders and teachers, which . . . builds self-esteem . . .

Multi-age classes tend to encourage a spirit of cooperation rather than competition among students. Each child is seen as unique and is encouraged to work and make progress at his or her own level and pace. Younger children imitate older ones and are exposed to more advanced concepts and skills. Older students benefit from being leaders and teachers, which not only builds self-esteem but also has been shown to enhance their own learning. Our classes feature cooperative learning teams, flexible grouping, and peer teaching, all of which have been shown to be very effective educational strategies.

Teaching this type of class requires the ability to integrate many subjects and aspects of learning. Our classes use a "unit" or "theme" approach. Having students for three years assists in the evaluation of progress and prevents unnecessary repetition of instruction. It also necessitates using a three-year social studies and science curriculum cycle. We cover the same curriculum, have access to the same materials, take the same standardized tests, and use the same report card format as other Fulton County classes.

This program offers an alternative for parents, teachers, and students. The first criterion for placement in this class is parent request. Children are then randomly selected to participate, provided we feel this is an appropriate placement for them.

Please make yourself comfortable and enjoy your visit. Our basic schedule is posted in the hall outside the classroom door. Feel free to ask the children questions, but remember that limiting your interactions will provide you with an observation of a more "typical" situation (if there is such a thing). During your visit you might want to focus on one or more of the following:

- Are the children teaching, or learning from one another? How?
- Are the children active learners?
- Do you observe different skill and ability levels among students?
- Can you tell first graders from second graders? Second graders from third graders? Are you sure?
- In what ways does this class differ from a single grade class? In what ways is it the same?
- How comfortable are the children? Are you comfortable?

At the 1992 meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in New Orleans, where they picked up the first issue of ***The MAGnet****, Patti Hinkle and Bonnie Wall were encouraged to find they have so much in common with other teachers across the country. They are eager to share information about what they are doing. Contact them at Barnwell Elementary School, 9425 Barnwell Road, Alpharetta, GA 30202.*

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Volume 2 Number 1 October 1993

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On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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Editor: Diane McClellan, Loyola University Chicago

Thinking about Piaget in Relationship to the Mixed-Age Classroom

Reports of the cognitive gains made by children in mixed-age groups are often difficult to interpret. However, Piagetian theory can help account for some of these gains. For example, Piaget (1977) argued that interaction with peers is a critical context for advancing children's cognitive development. When children have opportunity to argue or debate with peers they are required to *decenter* their thinking (*decentering* is the capacity to understand one's own thinking, and, at the same time, the thinking of others). Piaget observed that children's thinking is most deeply challenged by peers with whom they are closely matched in concepts and beliefs. Because peers relate to each other on a more or less equal footing, children are freer to actively confront their own ideas and the ideas of others when they are interacting with peers than when interacting with adults.

One of the drawbacks of direct instruction in the classroom, and of children's interaction with adults generally, is the tendency for children to acquiesce prematurely when their ideas are challenged (Brown and Palincsar, 1989; Kamii, 1973), thus precluding deeper consideration of the differences between their own views and those of adults.

Piaget also noted, however, that when individuals are too similar in their thinking, substantive areas of disagreement may not emerge regularly. Ample research demonstrates that children think more, learn more, remember more, take greater pleasure in learning, spend more time on task, and are more productive in classes that emphasize working in cooperative groups rather than in individualistic or competitive structures. Of course, cooperative groups are not conflict-free. Rather, consistent with Piaget, they are contexts in which peers come to deeper understandings by hearing the views of others, expressing their own views, and making cognitive accommodations to diverse views.

A mixed-age classroom, in other words, potentially ensures two of the conditions that maximize opportunities for children's cognitive development: (1) a decentralized classroom where the

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teacher's voice is less dominant than is usually the case in a same-age context; and (2) a diversity of ages, ensuring a rich mix of viewpoints among children.

References

Kamii, C. 1973. A Sketch of the Piaget-Derived Preschool Program. In J.L. Frost, ed. *Revisiting Early Childhood Education*, pp. 150-166. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.

Brown, A., and Palincsar, A. 1989. "Guided Cooperative Learning and Individual Knowledge Acquisition." L. Resnick, ed. *Knowing, Learning, and Instruction: Essays in Honor of Robert Glaser.*

Piaget, J. 1977. *The Development of Thought: Equilibration of Cognitive Structures.* New York: Viking.

—Excerpted and adapted from a chapter by Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D., in a forthcoming book tentatively titled, ***Full Circle: Re-Envisioning Multi-Age Education***, Penelle Chase and Jane Doan, editors; Heineman Publishers, spring 1994.

Implementation Challenges Highlighted in Report

The Primary Learning Communities (PLC) program, a nongraded K-2 curriculum recently pilot tested at three Houston elementary schools, was the target of a formative evaluation conducted during the program's second year (1991). Researchers highlighted its effectiveness in the development of reading skills, math skills, social skills, self-esteem, positive attitudes toward school, and self-discipline.

From surveying administrators, teachers, and others at the building level, researchers Kwame A. Opuni and Sharon Koonce identified the kinds of supports that may be necessary to institutionalize mixed-age classes in any primary level program:

- *More staff help and teacher aides.* Teacher aides and other support staff are needed because the teacher workload is increased significantly when teaching mixed-age groups. The additional staff are needed to act as resource persons to coordinate materials, keep track of which teachers have what materials, track literature that supports various themes, and help coordinate special events, field trips, and volunteer activities.
- *More staff training.* Teachers were particularly interested in training activities that addressed setting up mixed-age classrooms, K-2 content area instruction, child development, alternative assessment strategies, whole language, hands-on science and math for multi-age groups, developmentally appropriate practices, and working with children with special needs. Some teachers expressed concern that the challenges and demands of multi-age classrooms are such that only experienced teachers, with a reservoir of classroom management tactics and some

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previously used units or themes that could be revised and extended, would thrive in the mixed-age environment.

- *Smaller class size.* The teachers felt that a class size of 22 students is too large for mixed-age groups.

- *More instructional materials.* Math and science manipulatives, books, and bilingual versions of materials and books are needed. Many of the materials currently used are teacher created or teacher made. More funds for materials are needed, as well as access to these funds through a quick reimbursement process.

- *Extra time and extra stipends for teachers taking part in a multi-age program.* The extra demands of the program on teachers, including extra planning time, preparation of instructional materials, and meeting periodically to keep other teachers informed of problems and success, contribute to the need for extra compensation.

- *More cooperation from other school professionals.* The teachers suggested that the physical education, library, and computer teachers need to adopt the mixed-age grouping philosophy by providing services to whole classes rather than separating the group into grade levels, which undermines the mixed-age philosophy and creates scheduling problems.

For the complete report, see *Implementation Challenges of the Primary Learning Communities Program: Precautions and Potential.* The report will be in the ERIC system early in 1994.

Cautions for Mixed-Age Caregivers

Researchers Karen B. Debord and Julia T. Reguero de Atiles surveyed 92 family child care providers and school-age child care teachers to determine their attitudes about mixed-age grouping. Twenty-seven percent responded, and virtually all respondents claimed to enjoy mixed-age grouping. But caregivers of both age groups suggested some potential problems.

Younger children in school-age child care settings, for example, may sometimes feel left out or frustrated because they cannot keep up with older ones. They are likely to be more tired at the end of the school day than older children and need smaller groups to play in and relax, without pressure to accomplish something.

Teachers also suggested that care must be taken to see that older children get the attention they need, since younger children may require more supervision.

The complete study will be available in the ERIC database in early 1994. Contact ERIC/EECE at 1-800-583-4135 for complete ordering information.

Candidates for Winter Reading

Ellis, Arthur, and Jeffrey Fouts. (1993). *Research on Educational Innovations.* Princeton, NJ: Eye On Education.

Many new educational approaches lack a solid theoretical base or a proven track record on effectiveness in the classroom. The authors conclude that cooperative learning "using group goals and individual accountability" works well. Further, Ellis and Fouts point out that, although longitudinal evaluations of cooperative learning in entire districts do not yet exist, of the current trends highlighted in this book, cooperative learning has the most solid base in research.

Anderson, Robert H., and Barbara Nelson Pavan. (1993). *Nongradedness: Helping It to Happen.* Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company, Inc.

This book reviews basic concepts of non-gradedness (sometimes referred to as mixed-age grouping), both historically and as represented in the research, and provides a comprehensive guide to implementing nongraded schooling. A synthesis of practices that share many of the ideas and concepts underlying nongraded instruction, such as cooperative learning, is included. A comparison of graded and nongraded systems, and a list of 75 educational beliefs and ideas that is intended to help sort out those that are compatible from those that are incompatible with nongraded schooling, are also featured.

Bailey, Donald B., and others. (1993). Age of Peers and Early Childhood Development. *Child Development*, 64(3), 848-862.

An examination of the developmental trajectories of 59 children between 21 and 67 months of age randomly assigned to same-age or mixed-age groups showed that, across all domains, the mixed-age children tended to score higher than the same-age children at the younger ages. These average differences decreased over time and had disappeared by 5 years into this study.

From Our Readers

Using Workshops to Help Parents Understand the Whole-Language Multi-Age Classroom

Mary Beth Dennis, Ed.D.
Arcadia School, Tuscaloosa, AL

Instruction in our multi-age primary classroom is based on whole language/ constructivist principles. The parents of our students needed to understand not only the benefits of the multi-age classroom, but also our philosophy of how children learn. We met this challenge by holding two parent workshops where we discussed the workshop approach to reading and writing, learning centers, and the learning theory which drives our planning and daily activities.

At the beginning of the writing workshop we provided a handout on learning theory. The handout included statements such as, "children learn best when language is kept whole, meaningful, and natural"; and "children learn best when they are actively involved in learning, not by rote memorization and repetition."

We then discussed the stages children go through as they learn to spell, punctuate, use correct grammar, and express themselves. The idea of invented spelling brought out more questions, but we emphasized that as each child became developmentally ready, we stressed the skills of proofreading and editing at his or her own level. We gave parents a web which we had created, detailing all the language arts "skills" that the children were learning through writing their own stories and reports.

In February we held another workshop for parents, this time concentrating on how children learn to read. We developed an extensive handout which covered learning theory, examples of activities, and stages of reading development. We followed the same format as before: an explanation of the underlying philosophy of reading instruction and of how we put this philosophy into practice, and an open forum for discussion.

As a result of these workshops, we feel that our parents are more comfortable with our approach to teaching, feel more a part of the teaching and learning process, and understand better how children of differing ages and experience can work together successfully. We will have many of the same children in our classroom next year, but we plan to continue our parent workshops so that we can try some actual daily activities with parents and extend the workshops to math, social studies, and science.

We hope to gain our children's parents as allies in promoting not only multi-age classes, but also in advocating holistic, child-centered instruction at all levels of education.

New Videos on Mixed-Age Grouping

Two recent videos might be useful for parents and teachers:

> ***Mixed-Age Grouping at the Olive Mary Stitt School.*** (1993; VHS). (Part 1: 40 minutes; Part 2: 42 minutes; on a single videocassette). Available from United Learning, 6633 W. Howard St., P. O. Box 48718, Niles, IL 60714-0718; 800 424-0362. Cat. No. 10188V; $75.

Designed to give educators and parents insights into the concept of mixed-age grouping, this video records a round-table discussion of teachers and the principal of Olive Mary Stitt School. Featured are four classrooms at the school, where a mixed-age program has been in operation for over 20 years. The discussion is supported with comments from University of Illinois professors Lilian G. Katz and Ted Manolakes.

> ***The Nongraded School.*** (1992). (30 minutes; VHS). Part of the Phi Delta Kappan "Schools of Thought" series. Available from the Agency for Instructional Technology, Box A, 1111 W. 17th St., Bloomington, IN 47404-3019; 801-339-2203. $125.

Robert H. Anderson and Barbara Nelson Pavan, the authors of *Nongradedness: Helping It To Happen*, are interviewed by Lowell Rose on this 30-minute videotape. Topics covered are similar to those discussed in the book (see description on page 3).

Mixed-Age Grouping in Middle Level Education

The National Middle School Association recently (1992) stated that a fully departmentalized, ability-grouped seven-period day was incompatible with what is now known about young adolescents and their cognitive development. National and state reports on middle level education have also recommended the elimination of tracking students by academic ability.

A new book (1993) from the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) titled *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*, by Lee Manning (contact ACEI at 1-800-423-3563 for complete ordering information), suggests several alternatives: heterogeneous grouping, developmental-age grouping, multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, regrouping (e.g., regrouping within the heterogeneous group), and cross-age tutoring (p.57).

MAGnet readers would like to hear from colleagues who are using one or more of these instructional grouping strategies in the intermediate or middle level grades. If your school is using any of these instructional strategies, call ERIC/EECE at 1-800-583-4135 for information on submitting an article to ***The MAGnet***.

Quotable Quotes

"Mixing children of different ages will not guarantee that the benefits of mixed-age grouping will be realized. Four areas of concern are the optimum age range, the proportion of older to younger children, the time allocated to mixed-age grouping, and the appropriate curriculum."

> —*The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Education.* 1990. L.G. Katz et al. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

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Assessment in the Mixed-Age Classroom

In past issues of this newsletter we have discussed many of the basic principles of the mixed-age classroom. The underlying questions in this issue relate to consistency between the basic principles of mixed-age grouping and the various forms of student assessment. While acknowledging that there are many possible focuses for assessment (program assessment, teacher assessment, etc.), we focus here on the assessment of students. We examine alternative forms of student assessment that encourage student accountability and accommodate legitimate societal and parental needs for feedback on student progress.

When my son was about three years old, he developed a close friendship with another three-year-old, Robert, who lived down the block. Robert was a bright, gregarious, handsome young boy, full of self-confidence, a love of life, intelligence, and grace. Even at three, he was clearly destined to be well coordinated and athletic. As I watched the boys grow up together, I was impressed by how smart they both were. By this I mean that they both seemed to have a knack for interacting thoughtfully in the social and physical world. They put puzzles together, negotiated and organized games with friends, became experts at Nintendo, built forts, skillfully navigated around the neighborhood on their bikes, and made friendships with people of all ages.

While my son did very well on formal teacher assessments (tests, report cards, etc.) and standardized assessments, Robert did not. As he progressed through school, this affected him deeply: he began to withdraw and became intellectually fearful and suspicious. It did not escape his attention that he had been judged substandard in a very large part of his life.

I wondered if teachers and standardized assessments were useful to Robert in the long run, even though they seemed hurtful at the time. Did they, for example, make it likely that he would understand and value high level skills and a love of learning? Did they help him understand the nature of high quality work, or lead him to develop the desire and capacity to

become a productive and thoughtful citizen? Were the dispositions and skills he gained through these difficult experiences compatible with what it is we hope to achieve in the mixed-age classroom?

Perhaps these questions would be relatively unimportant if we were talking about only one young boy. Although almost all teachers are obliged to comply with traditional evaluation, no more than half of the students even in the best of schools handle successfully these methods of evaluating students' progress (Glasser, 1990). The way we assess students is an issue that affects dramatically children's experience of what learning and thinking are, and children's perception of how competently they function in a learning environment. Many schools are approaching assessment in the mixed-age classroom from perspectives that seem to have drawbacks for fewer students, yet provide adequate feedback to students, parents, and teachers.

The ideas of W. Edwards Deming, the American businessman who is often credited with single-handedly turning around the Japanese economy after World War II, recently have had a significant impact on the renovation of American business and American schools. Espousing ideas which are contrary to some of our most cherished views in business (and education), Deming suggests that practices such as evaluation of performance, merit ratings, or annual reviews are "deadly diseases/obstacles" to the creation of an environment that encourages high quality work. Evaluation of performance, he suggests, is management by *fear* that focuses on the end product, rather than on leadership to help people improve performance. The effect of such evaluation can be devastating. A manager (or teacher) becomes, in effect, a manager of defects rather than a facilitator to a worker's (or student's) development.

The following advice by Deming (1982) is particularly relevant to assessment practices and how they affect worker (or student) attitude and achievement:

- *Drive out fear so that everyone may work effectively*. By removing punishment as a motivator, workers and students feel secure and unafraid to ask questions, express ideas, and explore new areas of knowledge.

- *The job of management (or teaching) is not supervision but leadership*. Supervisors and teachers need to remove barriers (language, teacher accessiblity) that make it impossible for a person to do the job with pride in workmanship.

- *Break down organizational barriers*. All school personnel must work cooperatively to foresee and solve problems.

- *Cease depending on mass inspection (e.g., grades, standardized tests)*. Inspection to improve quality is too late, ineffective, and costly. High quality in industry and education comes not from inspection, but from process.

- *Build quality into the design stage* (the *process* of learning). The quality of student work is fostered through formative evaluation.

Deming has been a primary inspiration for what is often referred to as the "Quality School Movement." While this movement is having an increasing impact on American education, its tenets are not particularly mysterious or technical. Rather, these tenets are at the heart of what drives human behavior, particularly as related to creating the conditions that encourage high quality human effort and accomplishment.

William Glasser (1990, p.236) argues that although we want to encourage and support high quality work among teachers and students, the current ways we manage our schools may be causing the very problems we are trying to solve. According to Glasser, we currently attempt to motivate our students through coercion. In essence, the school tells the student, If you don't perform well, we will *hurt* you (embarrass, flunk, suspend, etc.). As these punishments pile up, as they do for many students, students conclude that they are fighting a losing battle and stop trying.

In a Quality School, students are motivated by being given a chance to learn, and to learn under conditions that are not geared rigidly to time. Ideally, this results in a class in which all students do much competent work and some high quality work.

Tests may be eliminated completely in a Quality School if alternative means of evaluation (including student self-evaluation) are used. Examples of alternative evaluations that involve demonstrating competence are doing a science project, writing a poem, measuring space in a building, interviewing community members for historical research, or practicing for the teacher (or the teacher's representative) an activity that has just been mastered. Tests, when used, may be any of the following: (1) lists of written or oral opinion; (2) written or oral evalution of data or other material; (3) problem-solving. Students are encouraged to bring all notes, books, and other written material to all tests and to ask the teacher for assistance in getting their thoughts clear even during the test. No test is final. All students are taught to evaluate what they have done, and all students, including those who do "A"-level or very high quality work, are given opportunities to improve what they have done.

What is your school doing to assess the work of students in mixed-age groups?

—Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D.
Loyola University
Chicago

References

Deming, W. Edwards. 1982. *Out of Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, Center for Advanced Engineering Study.

Glasser, William. 1990. *The Quality School: Managing Students without Coercion*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Questions to Ask When Developing Student Assessment

- Does the proposed assessment support or undermine the learning process for students and teachers?
- Is the assessment generally *formative* or *summative*? That is, does it provide useful feedback during the learning process (formative evaluation), or provide a single judgment at the end (summative evaluation)?
- Is the assessment responsive to what we know about how children learn?
- Will the assessment help our children become the kind of adults we want them to be—intellectually, emotionally, dispositionally?
- Does the proposed assessment support or undermine the likelihood that students will engage in high quality work?

What's New on Mixed-Age Grouping?

Yorks, Patti M.; Follo, Eric J. 1993. ***Engagement Rates during Thematic and***

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Traditional Instruction. ED363412; 45p.

This study investigated the engagement rates of 25 students in a mixed-age classroom of third- and fourth-graders. Students' time on task was compared using thematic, interdisciplinary instruction and traditional, single-subject instruction. Results indicated that the students' engagement rates were higher during thematic instruction.

Smith, Kelley A. 1993. ***Attitudes toward Multiple-Aged Classrooms of Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Grade Students***. ED361088; 12p.

This study investigated students' attitudes toward multi-age classrooms, specifically examining differences in attitudes based on gender and grade level. The Multiage Attitude Survey was administered at the end of the school year to students in two multi-age classrooms: one classroom with 11 third-grade and 10 fourth-grade students, the other with 11 fifth-grade and 13 sixth-grade students. Results revealed no significant difference in attitudes based on gender, but differences were found in grade level attitudes. The higher grade-level students had more negative attitudes toward multi-age groupings than did younger students.

Edelsky, Carole, Ed. 1992. ***Language Arts Topics and Educational Issues: Information Sheets***. Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking, Tucson, AZ. ED359486; 54p.

This collection of 29 short information articles discusses issues relating to whole language, phonics, student evaluation, spelling, and censorship. "What Are Some Tools Teachers Use To Evaluate That Also Help Children Learn?"; "Some Aspects of Assessment That We Often Forget"; "Who Should Evaluate? What Should Be Evaluated?"; "The Mixed-Age Primary: What and Why" are some of the articles likely to be of most interest to ***MAGnet*** readers.

Schrier, Deborah; Mercado, Betsy. 1994. ***"A Center Moves toward Multiage Grouping: What Have We Learned?"*** *Day Care and Early Education*; v21 n3 p9-12 Spr 1994.

Noting concerns of parents and caregivers, recent research suggests that major benefits result from multi-age grouping. Explores practical issues raised by parents, teachers, and administrators in the Early Childhood Research Center at the State University of New York at Buffalo as it moves toward multiage grouping in its classes.

Black, Susan. 1993. ***"Beyond Age and Grade."*** *Executive Educator*, v15 n9 p17-20 Sep 1993. EJ470504.

Multi-age grouping, or exchanging traditional grade-level designations for teaching older and younger students together in one room, is as old as the one-room schoolhouse. Teachers comfortable with mixed-age classes are those who believe students learn by being active, engaged, and thoughtful, rather than by sitting passively or doing rote assignments. Guidelines and start-up advice are offered.

Shaeffer, Margaret B.; Hook, James. 1993. ***"Are Extra-Year Classes Worth It?"*** *American School Board Journal*, v180 n8 p31-32 Aug 1993. EJ468664.

Extra-year programs for children in kindergarten and grade 1 are not effective in human or cost terms. What does work is a developmentally appropriate primary curriculum that emphasizes integrated learning across the curriculum, small group instruction, and mixed-age grouping.

Windows on Learning at Crow Island Elementary

Crow Island Elementary School (Winnetka, Illinois) is now in its sixth year of assessing children in mixed-age groups by means of a comment form, portfolios, and student self-assessment.

The teachers began the process of developing a new approach to assessment by becoming regular observers in each others' classrooms and thinking about what learning is, what it looks like, and how teachers could record and report it. The goal was to create an organized system of assessment that maintained respect for children's individuality and for teachers' independence. The developing system was estabished in part on a theoretical base suggested by Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which teachers felt mirrored what they saw in student learning.

Teachers eventually developed a comment form with six categories: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, growth of the child as learner, and growth of the child as a group worker. The final version arranges topics in a circle around the student's name and includes sections for special subjects, such as art. On the front is a space for students' self-assessment comments, and on the back is an overview of the yearly curriculum. Teachers have great flexibility, and some add student photos or change the structure of the form to accommodate their own ideas about assessment.

One second grade teacher, Ernie Miller, developed a videorecording assessment system that includes a year-long archive of videos that chronicles both failures and successes, and parts of which are used in individual parent conferences. A special comments sheet explains the videotaped events and what they represent. The video footage is shortened to a two-hour classroom video presentation that all parents and students can view and request copies of at the end of the year. If the parent of a prospective second grader wants to get an idea of what Miller's class will be like, the parent can borrow a copy of last year's video. Some teachers prefer to use photographs and written journals, but the idea is the same: a visual record for the teacher, the child, and parents.

Portfolios are also part of Crow Island's assessment. Students choose what represents their work and their growth, review the collection periodically, and write additional comments about especially important pieces. This self-assessment makes the portfolios particularly meaningful to the students. Each folder's first page is titled "Ask me about..." and lists special activities in which students have taken part but that might not be represented in the portfolio. The list provides parents and students with conversational starting points.

The portfolios are stored at the school, and students can expect to leave Crow Island with a record of their work from or including kindergarten through fifth-grade.

Remember when it was easy to keep up with the mixed-age literature? Well, it's not so easy any more! Over the summer, we can help you get caught up on what's new in research and practice about mixed-age grouping. Order the new ERIC/EECE ***ReadySearch on Mixed-Age Groups in Elementary and Early Childhood Education*** *(Cat. #112, $8.00, prepaid). ERIC/EECE's ordering address is on the back page.*

Beginning with the Child

Maureen Dergusoff of British Columbia described the British Columbia approach to

assessment at the recent Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference in Chicago (March 1994). To develop new modes of assessment, teachers decided to follow the anthropological model of *observing* students, *examining artifacts* of their learning, and *engaging them in conversation* to find out what they have been doing and why.

The observational process provides base-line data describing what children already know and what they need to learn. Every time a teacher is watching a child, talking to him, or looking at his work, she or he should be asking three questions: What is the student able to do? What areas require further attention or development? and, In what ways can I support the child's learning? Once learning needs are established, teacher and student are able to arrive at goals and strategies for further learning.

Ready to create portfolios but unsure about how to proceed, teachers initially collected everything, but they found that discussions with students made clear what to keep. They also found that the new assessment techniques supported the philosophy of multi-year mixed-age grouping. Collecting student work over a long period of time——two or three years—provides much better evidence of progress and growth than a collection based on a single year of work.

A central piece of assessment in British Columbia is self-assessment. The purpose is to help children learn to set goals for themselves and take charge of more of their own learning. Questions such as, What do you want to be better at? How will I know that you are doing better? What do you do if you have trouble figuring out how to ----? are useful. In some classes, children write report cards for themselves, and these are included in the narrative report cards that are sent home.

Teachers are realizing the importance of involving others, especially parents and students themselves, in assessing children's learning. Most parent-teacher conferences now include the child. Reporting may be done through student-involved conferencing; student-led conferencing; and evening events, including a curriculum evening or a celebration-of-learning evening, or other events that involve teachers, parents, and students.

Dergusoff listed three principles that she believes should guide assessment: being actively involved, assessing individual and social learning, and recognizing that kids learn at different rates and in different styles. Growth over time is what it's all about.

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_____ I am interested in contributing an article about our mixed-age grouping practices to ***The MAGnet***. Please send me author guidelines.

A Note to Our Readers

If you have ideas on assessment or have experiences related to this discussion that you would like to share with your colleagues, we invite you to contribute articles related to the need for accountability and assessment of students and of mixed-age programs.

Articles sent or electronically mailed to us by September 15 will be considered for inclusion in the fall issue of *The MAGnet*. If we receive enough articles, we will continue the discussion of assessment in our fall issue. See the last page for our address, fax number, and electronic mail address.

From ERIC/EECE ...

A new digest on *The Project Approach* is available free from ERIC/EECE, along with a list of all new publications. Both can be requested by calling 1-800-583-4135.

Have you joined ECENET-L yet? If you have Internet access, you should consider "joining" ECENET-L. ECENET-L is an active group of professionals, students, policy-makers, and parents interested in issues related to young children (birth to 8 years of age). Recent discussions have centered on early reading, entering preschool, teaching phonics, and school entry age. Join us for some lively discussions. ECENET-L is free if you have Internet access.

To subscribe, send an email message to LISTSERV@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu. Leave the subject line blank, and in the body of the message, type:

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Then, send the message. If you have problems subscribing, contact ERIC/EECE at 1-800-583-4135.

Quotes on Assessment

"Assessing kids should be based on a simple construct. We want to know where they were, where they are now, and the distance they have traveled between where they were and where they are. The distance they have come is something to be celebrated, not with "A", "B", or "C", but with other mechanisms. That's the basic concept. You may say, my goodness, any kindergarten child could figure that out. Well, that's the idea."

—Robert Anderson,
ASCD Conference,
Chicago, March 1994.

"At the center of 'authentic' student assessment is a very simple (and often overlooked) procedure. It is, perhaps, the most powerful student assessment tool available to teachers. It has also been written about extensively as characteristic of the most successful school principals and business executives: *The teacher needs to walk around her classroom frequently while the children are working—see what the children are doing, what they are thinking about, what their questions are*. In keeping with the spirit of this notion, some teachers and principals even decide not to have a desk in their classroom or office."

—Mary Stitt
Principal Emeritus
Olive Mary Stitt
Elementary School

"A curriculum and the teaching practices used must take into account all four categories of learning goals: knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings, and all four categories of learning goals must be assessed."

—Lilian G. Katz,
"Dispositions as Educational Goals, ERIC Digest" 1993

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Editor: Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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Assessment Revisited: Views from the Field

*Editors note: In this issue we continue to examine assessment in mixed-age classes. The following is based on a discussion with Dick Streedain, Principal of Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois, before his retirement. (Hubbard Woods is one of four schools discussed extensively in **Schools That Work: America's Most Innovative Public School Education Programs**, by George H. Wood (Penguin Books, 1992).) —Diane McClellan, Editor.*

Diane: It seems to me that one of the reasons that the classroom environment has traditionally been simplified [by having same-age classes, for example] is that we think we can get a clear, uncomplicated idea about what children can and are learning. We really have become assessment-driven in that sense, in part because of our misunderstanding of what learning is and of how the human mind develops. Given your belief in the importance of a rich learning environment, are there assessment strategies that strengthen rather than sabotage teachers' efforts to create diverse, rich, and complex learning environments?

Dick: Sure. Right now we're developing alternative strategies like portfolios of children's work over a period of time. Portfolio assessment gives us a richer sense of what a child has interacted with instructionally and ways he or she has grown in skills and knowledge.

But assessment strategies such as portfolios are really just a very small part of the direction we need to move in. Portfolio assessment can become limiting if it is used too exclusively. We need assessments that look at the environment and the teacher and the materials, as well as the child. We need to look at the concept of uniformity versus diversity. Do our materials (books, basals, etc.) enhance uniformity or diversity? Is there uniformity or diversity among the children in the classroom? When we look at a teacher, is she becoming more diverse in her own awareness and thinking, or more uniform?

Interestingly, along these lines, I find myself bothered sometimes by how the notion of `developmentally appropriate practice' is interpreted. When you begin to think about it, when parents are having a conversation at dinner with their children of different ages, they are not sitting back and saying, `OK, how do I ask this question so it's developmentally appropriate?' The conversation just evolves in a very intuitive and informal way.

And what therefore happens, I think, is that children are exposed to richer thought processes that don't just focus on direct instruction targeted at one developmental level. The point is not just about what I, as a parent or teacher, am trying to teach directly. An important question is, what is the child learning indirectly? That's just as powerful—if not more powerful sometimes—in the learning process. So I think what we're trying to do in the portfolio approach to assessment is broaden our notion of assessment, and I'm excited about this. At the same time, I think you can still fall into a very narrow use of portfolio assessment that simply looks at what a teacher is teaching in a very prescribed curriculum.

Diane: It sounds like part of what you're suggesting is that we need to re-infuse the classroom with some of the complexity that children and adults ideally find in the world outside the classsroom.

Dick: Right, not a chaotic environment any more than the world outside the classroom is necessarily chaotic. But rich, full of life. Minds actively engaged with life in all its contradictions and complexity. And a mixture of ages is one element in allowing for more diversity, more complexity.

Diane: I also hear you saying that assessment needs to be thought of much more broadly than it presently is. That assessment should inform us of how we are doing in creating a rich and engaging learning environment. So then, assessment is assessment for change, which informs us about what to do in the future rather than simply making a judgment about how the child is performing along a rather limited range of skills and knowledge.

Dick: Right. So that, for example, when the teacher finds a child struggling in reading, the first thing she says to herself is `How do I enrich this child's reading experience?' versus `How do I fix this problem?' It's really a matter of two different approaches. The former is an enrichment orientation that values the child's knowledge and experience and tries to build connections...

Diane: ...rather than seeing that child through a lens of his or her deficiency. What you're suggesting takes time. Maybe the greatest dilemma with the way we are currently using assessment of children is that it makes us rush more.

Dick: Exactly. One of the things that's impressive about what's happening in early childhood schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy,* is that somehow time slows down and with it a deepening of knowledge occurs. The teachers take time to uncover the child's interests and knowledge through more observation. And a lot of their observations are very informal. Often, it's putting on the tape recorder and hearing conversations on what kids are really thinking about. The second thing they have is an environment that is very much student initiated. Four- and five-year-olds have the autonomy to take initiative in their learning. Also, it helps that teachers are working with kids over a longer period of time. They stay with the same children over a period of two or three years and that builds greater coherence versus fragmentation in the learning process.

Diane: One final question: As a young teacher in the early 1970s I had a mixed-age classroom and was part of a group of teachers that was trying to implement many of the innovations we are talking about. And after a while I began to feel we were in trouble because many of us had dropped all forms of outside accountability. It seemed as if some teachers were taking a rather laissez-faire approach to teaching. And I think this is a mistake. Again, one of the things that I think we can learn from Reggio Emilia is the notion that the teacher is a full partner with the child in the learning and teaching process. It's the apprenticeship model of learning, a co-construction of knowledge between teacher and child, and between the child and other children.

So, my final question to you: Is there a place for external reality checks such as state assessments? If we keep more objective and broad-based assessment in perspective, can they provide us with a reality check so that we, as teachers, remain mindful of our accountability to help children develop into citizens who are skilled and knowledgeable?

Dick: I think I can say to you in terms of the reading, math, and writing piece of it, [external assessments] are important in that they give us a general sense of how we are doing as a whole. And I think the other part I hear you saying is, how do you maintain balance? Can we find answers that are really in the middle and avoid the pendulum swings that sometimes keep us stuck?

---

*Reggio Emilia, Italy, is a medium-sized Italian town that many observers believe has some of the best publicly funded preschools in the world.

Different Ages and Learning Stages: Evaluating Learning in a Multi-Age Team

By H. James McLaughlin, Jackie Anderson, Pat Bennett, Christie Pratt, and Beverly Stripling, at Haynes Bridge Middle School, Alpharetta, Georgia

Authors' Note: Two years ago, we tried to accommodate our students' needs by creating a multi-age group: the EAGLE Team. Project EAGLE ("Expanded Age Group Learn-ing Experience") was initiated by a principal, 4 teachers, and 115 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students who believed that this idea might be a worth-while alternative to the standard practice of grouping by chrono-logical age. We made a commitment to work together for at least the next three years. The EAGLE Team at Haynes Bridge Middle School (HBMS) is located in the rapidly growing northern section of Fulton County, Georgia.

Our ideas about evaluation rest on several premises. The first is that if students and teachers remain together for several years, teachers are able to ascertain what students know and do not know well, how they learn, and the best ways to teach them. The second premise is that if students progress through the curriculum less restrained by chronological age, then evaluation should accommodate their current knowledge and their need to grow. Our evaluation systems track students' long-term learning within and across sub-ject areas. For us, this entails multi-level assessments, informal and formal peer modeling by older students, and challeng-ing activities and assessments.

In evaluating our multi-age, multi-year program, we have developed three metaphors: evaluation *as a spiral* over time, *as a web* across subject areas, and *as a bridge* to reach students' perspectives of what they are learning.

Spiral Evaluation. The goal of spiral evaluation is to examine long-term learning over a three-year span. There are two ways

in which evaluation "spirals." First, there is an upward spiral toward more conceptual complexity. Second, we hope that by revisiting certain aspects of the curriculum each year, students will experience long-term learning. By using spiral evaluation, teachers and students know what has been taught and learned over a three-year time span. We have three years to work toward transfer of concepts, information, and skills to new situations.

Spiral evaluation also has a positive impact on students' sense of security and the development of leadership. "Old" students (7th and 8th graders) can explain a concept from the prior year to "new" students (6th graders). For example, older students this fall explained to the incoming 6th graders the multiple purposes of our Agrihabitat and demonstrated how to work in the gardens. The old ones felt comfor-table sharing what they had learned. They were mentoring at the same time that they were reviewing and determining what they knew. One of our purposes for evaluation is to help students become "lead-learners."

Webbed Evaluation. Our multi-age, multi-year, interrelated curriculum means that we also evaluate learning across the curriculum. We conceive of our curriculum and the evaluation of student learning as a "web" that crosses the hall from classroom to classroom. The web unites us in a com-mon effort to secure student understanding in many contexts.

For example, writing skills are evaluated across the curriculum in every subject area. Spelling words in language arts are taken from other subjects, and examples of sentences for learning new writing skills are taken from social studies texts. Math word problems frequently relate to information from social studies and science.

Bridged Evaluation. As we have stated, evaluation of long-term learning can be metaphorically conceived as a spiral, a web . . . and a bridge. The bridge represents our means of understanding students' perspectives; we are trying to evaluate what students believe they are learning, and how they are learning, over the three-year program. Bridges to student understandings are built on day-to-day interactions; bridges are also erected through the systematic collection and analysis of research data.

For example, one set of our data involves student performance on stan-dardized tests. We analyze national Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores and state Curriculum Based Assessment of writing skills, both general and within certain domains of writing. We also survey students' attitudes toward school, other students, and the curriculum; hold large and small group discussions with students to gain a picture of what the students value and whether they support our program's goals; and collect, analyze, and respond to student journals. Together, we analyze data and write up what we have learned, and then determine how to change what we do.

Learning from assessment requires the willingness and the courage to examine our own effectiveness. It especially matters on a multi-age team that we know how to spiral, web, and bridge our assessment practices. We cannot blame our students' academic shortcomings on some other anonymous teacher; for three years *we* are responsible. We hope our use of these metaphors for multi-age, multi-year assessment will help you to think about what you do to document learning.

What's New on Mixed-Age Grouping

"American Montessori Society Position Papers." *Montessori Life*, 6(2), 6-7. Spring 1994 EJ484031

Presents an American Montessori Society position paper on "Multi-Age Grouping" that

offers an analysis of eight specific methods and strategies of multi-age practice.

Schrier, Deborah; Mercado, Betsy. (Spring 1994). "A Center Moves toward Multiage Grouping: What Have We Learned?" *Day Care & Early Education*, 21(3), 9-12. EJ483855

Despite concerns from parents and caregivers, recent research suggests that major benefits result from multiage grouping. This article examines the concept of multiage grouping and explores practical issues raised by parents, teachers, and administrators in the Early Childhood Research Center at the State University of New York at Buffalo as it moves toward multiage grouping in its classes.

Dever, Martha Taylor; And Others. (March 1994). "Multiage Classrooms: A New Way to Learn Math." *Principal*, 73(4), 22, 24, 26. EJ481201

Recent research supports Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory; children receiving peer assistance can stretch their learning beyond their individual accomplishment. A study of a multiage classroom revealed three strategies used by children working together to solve math problems—modeling, tutoring, and pairing/sharing activities. The multiage setting invites collaboration and sharing, while helping students meet mathematics learning standards.

Fogarty, Robin, Ed. (1993). *The Multiage Classroom: A Collection*. ED369574; 227p. (Available From: IRI/Skylight Publishing, Inc., 200 East Wood Street, Suite 274, Palatine, IL 60067 ($15.95, plus $5 shipping and handling).)

Noting that the recent call for holistic models of schooling dictates a thorough investigation of more natural groupings of students, this collection of articles reviews available literature on multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classrooms. Divided into six sections, the chapters explore the overriding concerns and the pros and cons of mixed-age instruction, delineate the procedures and practices associated with multiage instruction, illustrate actual classroom practice, and examine issues of evaluation and accountability in such classrooms.

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_____ I am interested in contributing an article about our mixed-age grouping practices to ***The MAGnet***. Please send me author guidelines.

From ERIC/EECE...

Reflections on the Reggio Emilia Approach, a new book in the ERIC/EECE *Perspectives* series, edited by Lilian G. Katz and Bernard Cesarone ($10 plus #$1.50 shipping/handling; all orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars), is available now from ERIC/EECE.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

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Implementing the Mixed-Age Classroom

*In **Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom**, Bruce Miller describes and interprets recent research that teachers and principals interested in starting or refining mixed-age classrooms will find practical and helpful. In the following excerpt, Miller summarizes and interprets some key points made by teachers who are experienced in implementing mixed-age classrooms.*

—Diane McClellan, Editor.

First and foremost, ensure that your reasons for change reflect the needs and interests of the children you serve. Respondents were clear on this point: Their number one reason for implementing multiage practices was their belief that it would benefit children. Moreover, practitioners must know what practices will produce the benefit. Will the benefit accrue through simply putting various ages together in the same room? What are the advantages of having the same children over several years? Knowing and understanding why you are implementing multiage is critical to its success.

Second, build a solid base of support among key stakeholders: community and parents, teachers, and administrators. Engage these groups in analyzing and discussing the reasons for change: Is there research to support the desired direction? Are there resources to help answer questions? If possible, visit a variety of multiage schools. Ask questions of staff and students about the implementation process, materials, grouping, whole language, and hands-on math and science. If time and/or resources do not allow for personal visits, then reading case studies, making phone calls, and securing videotapes may be the next best option.

Third, build a climate throughout the school and community that is characterized by open communication and trust. Include people in the process and take the time to explain the changes. In the community, this may mean providing opportunities for direct involvement in decision-making, community forums, and other strategies for parent

education. In the school, this means learning together as a staff, where beliefs and practices are discussed and evaluated. Above all, create an environment where people feel safe taking the kinds of risks necessary to change classroom practice.

Finally, be realistic. Implementation requires planning, patience, time, and an understanding of the process of change. Both respondent groups placed a major emphasis on planning at least one to two years in advance of implementation. Moreover, research on successful innovation (Miles and Huberman 1980, Fullan 1993), indicates that successful change efforts take three years or longer to become part of the everyday realities of school life.

As realists, one must recognize that ultimately it is people who are being asked to change. As the survey data show, it is difficult for people to "let go of traditional grade-level thinking and instruction." After all, most parents, students, teachers, and administrators have spent their entire lives in graded learning institutions. Putting a multiage program in place is easy compared to changing the way people think, especially when curriculum and the textbook industry are dominated by graded materials. Moreover, individuals vary in how readily they embrace new ideas, strategies, and practices. Again, drawing on the themes emerging from the surveys, educators must avoid top-down mandates, especially when the developmental differences of staff are not considered.

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Fullan, M.G. (1993). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2nd edition). New York: Teachers College Press. ED354588.

Miles, M.B., and A.M. Huberman. (1980). The Realities of School Improvement Programs: Analysis of Qualitative Data. Proposal to National Institute of Education.

New Listserv on Multiage Learning

Ridgeway Elementary School in Columbia, Missouri, has established a new "listserv" or Internet-based discussion group on multiage education. According to Susan Fales, principal at Ridgeway, "we established this discussion group as part of a grant we received. We've been excited about how many people have responded."

To subscribe, send an electronic mail message to:

listproc@services.dese.state.mo.us

leave the subject line blank, and in the body of the message, type:

subscribe multiage Firstname, lastname

Send the message. You will receive confirmation shortly. To send a message to the list, send an electronic mail message to:

MULTIAGE@Services.dese.state.mo.us

Your first message should let others know about your specific interests in multiage teaching and learning.

Lilian Katz: On the Benefits of Mixed-Age Grouping

Goodlad and Anderson, who introduced the modern notion of the non-graded elementary school in 1959, raised our awareness of the fact that age is a very crude indicator of what learning experiences children are ready for. Actual implementation of Goodlad and Anderson's ideas originally consisted largely of organizing children in groups by ability rather than by age, thereby homogenizing groups in a different way!

We have come to understand that the benefits of mixed-age grouping rest on the assumption that the differences within a group of children can be a source of rich intellectual and social benefits. The terms "ungraded" and "nongraded" used by Goodlad and Anderson suggest what we do

not do in mixed-age settings separate children into grade groups by age but they fail to describe what we try *to* do. I would like to encourage use of the term "mixed-age grouping" instead. A mixed-age group consisting of children for whom the age range is larger than a year sometimes two years, and sometimes more, is intended to optimize the educative potential of the mixture itself.

Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them. The amount of time children spend in groups in schools and child care centers, particularly for preschoolers, amounts to replacing families and spontaneous neighborhood groups as contexts for child-to-child interaction for large portions of children's waking hours. More and more children are deprived of the information, competencies, and modeling that becomes available to them in natural mixed-age groups. The intention of mixed-age grouping is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children.

Opportunity to Nurture

When we ask a five-year-old to be tolerant of a four-year-old's first fumbling efforts to put on her jacket, or a six-year-old to be appreciative of a five-year-old's early efforts to read, we have the beginnings of parent education. Our young children need real contacts in which their dispositions to be nurturing can be manifested and strengthened. Furthermore, the young children who are encouraged, comforted and nurtured by older children will be able emulate their older classmates when they themselves become the older ones in a group.

Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but to find companions among their peers who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways.

Ways of Learning

Single-age groups seem to create enormous normative pressures on the children and the teacher to expect all the children to be at the same place on knowledge and skills. There is a tendency in a homogeneous age group to penalize the children who fail to meet normative expectations. Similarly, there is also a temptation in a group of same-age children to over use whole-class instruction. There is no evidence to show that a group of children who are all within a twelve-month age range can be expected to learn the same things, the same way, the same day, at the same time. Even within a single-age group a wide range of knowledge and skills is likely to gainsay whole group instruction.

On the other hand, the wider the age span in a group, the wider the range of behavior and performance likely to be accepted and tolerated by the adults as well as by the children themselves. In a mixed-age group a teacher is more likely to address individual differences, not only between children but within the child. In a mixed-age group, it is acceptable for a child to be ahead of his same-age peers in math, for example, but behind them in reading, or social competence, or vice versa.

Social benefits research indicates that children associate different expectations by age very early. Experiments have shown that even a three-year-old will assign different kinds of behavior when shown a picture of an older child than to a picture of a younger child. For instance, younger children assign to older children instructive, leadership, helpful, and sympathizing roles, whereas older children assign to younger children the need for help and instruction.

Thus in the mixed-age group, younger children perceive the older ones as being able to contribute something, and the older children see the younger ones as in need of their contributions. These mutually reinforcing perceptions create a climate of expected cooperation beneficial to the children, and to the teachers who otherwise feel they are doing all the giving; increasing the age range automatically increases the number of teachers available. Some older children will give younger children incorrect information and suggestions, and wrong advice. Such interactions help the teacher know where both children need her help.

Experiments in which children worked in groups of three same-age groups and mixed-age groups show that in the latter, older children spontaneously facilitate other children's behavior. In the single-age triad, on the other hand, the same children spontaneously become domineering and tend to compete or engage in what is normally called "one-upmanship." When groups of children ranging in age from seven- to nine-years-old or nine- to eleven-years-old are asked to make decisions, they go through the processes of reaching a consensus with far more "organizing statements" and more leadership behavior. When the same children deal with the same kind of tasks in same-age groups, there are more reports of bullying behavior. Other prosocial behaviors such as help giving and sharing are more frequent in mixed-age groups. Turn taking is smoother. There is more social responsibility and sensitivity to others in mixed-age groups than in single-age groups.

Observations of four- and five-year-olds in a group found that when the teacher asked the older children who were not observing the class rules to remind the younger ones what the rules were, the older children's own "self-regulatory behavior" improved. Of course, the older children could become quite bossy; but bossiness can occur in any group.

Social Participation

In a mixed-age group, younger children are capable of participating and contributing to far more complex activities than they could ever initiate if they were by themselves. Once the older ones set up the activity the younger ones can participate, even if they could never have initiated it.

Research indicates that a mixed-age group can provide a therapeutic environment for children who are socially immature. Younger children will less quickly rebuff an immature child than the child's same-age mates. Younger children will allow an older child to be unsophisticated much longer than will his or her age mates.

Intellectual Benefits

Even four-year-olds spontaneously change the way they speak to suit the age of the listener. They change the length of the sentence, the tone, and the words they use. Studies of cognitive development suggest that cognitive conflict arises when interacting children are at different levels of understanding, regardless of their ages. If two children are working on a task that one understands well and another does not, the latter is likely to learn from the former if he or she understands the task very well, and if they argue. Only if one understands something very well can explanations be varied during argument.

Risks and Concerns

Every method of grouping children has risks. One concern with mixed-age grouping is ensuring that younger children are not overwhelmed by older and/or more competent ones, in any class. Teachers have an important role to play in maximizing the potential benefits of the age

mixture. For example, they can encourage children to turn to each other for explanations, directions, and comfort in times of stress. They can turn to older ones to read words, paragraphs, and stories to younger children, and to listen to younger students read.

In addition, teachers can encourage older children to take responsibility, either for an individual younger child or for younger children in general. Teachers can encourage older children not to gloat over their superior skills, but to take satisfaction in their competence in reading to younger children, in writing things down for them, in explaining things, in showing them how to use the computer, in helping them find something, in helping them get dressed to go outdoors, and so forth.

Teachers can show older children how to protect themselves from being pestered by younger children, for example, by saying to the younger children, "I can't help you right this minute, but I will as soon as I finish what I am doing." Teachers can also help younger children learn to accept their own limitations and their place in the total scheme of things, as well as encourage older children to think of roles and suitable levels that younger ones could take in their work or in their activities. The basic requirement is that the children be respectful of each other.

When teachers discourage older children from calling younger ones "cry babies" or "little dummies" they help resist the temptation of age stereotyping. Every once in a while a teacher says to a misbehaving first grader something like "that behavior belongs in kindergarten." She then expects them to be kind and helpful to the kindergartners during recess, when they've just heard that kindergartners are a lower form of life! A mixed-age group is also a context in which to teach children not only to appreciate where they themselves so recently were, but to prize their own progress, and to develop a sense of the continuity of development.

— Lilian G. Katz, May 1995

From ERIC/EECE...

- *Family Involvement in Multicultural Learning,* a new ERIC/EECE Digest by Kevin Swick.
- *Integate, Don't Isolate: Computers in the Early Childhood Classroom,* an ERIC/EECE Digest by Bernadette Davis and Daniel Shade.
- *A to Z: The Early Childhood Educator's Guide to the Internet* (Cat. 214, $10/yr; please prepay orders). A looseleaf service with an initial installment that describes useful Internet sites and provides basic information; two updates each year.

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Looping through the Years: Teachers and Students Progressing Together

Editor's Note: This special issue introduces the concept of "looping" and its potential advantages and disadvantages.

Whether we call it student-teacher progression, multi-year grouping, or looping, the phenomenon of students and teachers remaining together for two or more years is a procedure that complements mixed-age teaching and learning. More common in Europe than in the United States, looping was advocated by early twentieth century Austrian educator Rudolf Steiner and has been used successfully for years in Germany, where in some schools, teacher teams and their students stay together for six years. More commonly in the United States, students and teachers stay together two or three years. Grouping may be in single or mixed ages. Since the 1970s, looping has been used with success in the United States as well.

Teachers with multi-year assignments with the same group of students have identified several social and academic advantages to looping. Social advantages include:

- reduced apprehension about the new school year and the new teacher after the first year (Hanson, 1995; Checkley, 1995;
- stronger benefits from the time spent on developing social skills and cooperative group strategies in the subsequent years (Hanson, 1995);
- increased student self-confidence (Checkley, 1995) and a chance to overcome shyness (Mazzuchi & Brooks, 1992):
- a stronger sense of community—and of family—among parents, students, and teachers (Checkley, 1995); and
- greater support for children who look to school as a stabilizing influence in their lives.

Academic benefits are also numerous. Among them are:

- a gain of almost a month of teaching time, since time for getting acquainted is eliminated and less review is needed (Hanson, 1995; Mazzuchi & Brooks, 1992);

- an increase in teacher knowledge about children's intellectual strengths and weaknesses in a way that is impossible in a single year;
- an increase in the number of chances that are available to make connections during learning and over time (Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994); and
- more opportunities available to tailor the curriculum to individual student needs (Checkley, 1995).

While many experts believe that the potential advantages of looping outweigh potential disadvantages, all agree that parents and teachers who are concerned about the "down" side of looping are worried primarily about the possibility of a bad match between teachers and pupils, or among individual students or groups of students.

Experts suggest that it is a good idea for schools to anticipate and plan for social interventions that might be needed ahead of time, and to make a commitment to being supportive of individual children and teachers as they adapt to the social environment. A balance between the potential advantages of looping and the needs of an individual student in unusual circumstances for a new start, for example, should be achieved. While moving an unhappy student to another class is likely to be rare and a last resort, it should not be ruled out.

Other concerns include:

- the need to be extra-sensitive to new students (Hanson, 1995);
- the heavy sense of responsibility that teachers feel for their students' progress and performance on standardized tests (Hanson, 1995); and
- the separation period at the end of the cycle, which is difficult for teachers and students (Hanson, 1995).

Experienced educators see looping as a way of making large high schools less anonymous; of meeting the needs of the changing American family; and of creating more continuity and fostering social constructivism in learning. High-quality research is needed to determine whether, as many educators contend, multi-year programs have a profound impact both socially and instructionally.

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For More Information on Looping...

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ERIC DIGEST

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Implementing the Multiage Classroom

By Joan Gaustad

Multiage grouping (placing children ranging in age by three years or more in one class) and related instructional practices such as continuous-progress learning, developmentally appropriate practices, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning are being implemented with increasing frequency in classrooms across the nation. These research-based innovations offer promising alternatives to traditional graded educational practices—*if* implementation is carefully and knowledgeably planned. Perfunctory planning that ignores the magnitude and complexity of the change can produce disastrous results.

What Do Teachers Need to Know?

To meet the varied needs of multiage students, teachers need indepth knowledge of child development and learning and a larger repertoire of instructional strategies than most single-grade teachers possess. They must be able to design open-ended, divergent learning experiences accessible to students functioning at different levels. They must know when and how to use homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping and how to design cooperative group tasks. They must be proficient in assessing, evaluating, and recording student progress using qualitative methods such as portfolios and anecdotal reports.

Multiage teachers must be able to facilitate positive group interaction and to teach social skills and independent learning skills to individual students. They must know how to plan and work cooperatively with colleagues, as team teaching is commonly combined with multiage organization. Finally, they must be able to explain multiage practices to parents and other community members, building understanding and support for their use.

The critical judgment and common sense of teachers are essential ingredients in successful implementation. Methods that sound promising in theory may need considerable adaptation to be effective in practice. Ideally, teachers should have opportunities to observe competent models demonstrating multiage methods, try them out in the classroom, receive feedback on their efforts, reflect on the experience, revise their plans, and try again.

What Do Administrators Need to Know?

Administrators should understand the principles underlying multiage organization and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. In planning for implementation, however, knowledge about the change process may be even more valuable. Innovations often fail because policymakers give teachers insufficient time, training, and psychological support (Hord and others 1987). Effectively implementing a single innovation requires several years—and multiage teaching involves multiple, complex innovations.

Administrators must realize that many of the underlying assumptions of multiage teaching conflict with deeply ingrained assumptions underlying traditional age-graded instructional methods. Miller (1994) observes that for many teachers, "unlearning powerfully held notions about how children learn" is an essential part of implementing multiage practices. This process is demanding, even for the most receptive and flexible individuals.

Multiage instructional and organizational skills differ greatly from those used in the single-grade classroom. Veterans may feel as insecure as first-year teachers as they struggle to learn these new skills. In one school, Miller found that teachers with more experience seemed to feel even greater frustration in the early stages of change.

To help teachers weather this stressful transition process, administrators must provide psychological support as well as technical assistance. They must create a school culture that supports teacher learning, an environment in which it is safe to risk making mistakes. Without such support, many teachers will retreat to safe, familiar age-graded methods.

What Is the Principal's Role?

The principal plays a key role in creating this supportive school culture. The principal must provide teachers with opportunities to learn multiage teaching methods, monitor the progress of implementation, and give teachers praise, feedback, and suggestions. He or she should be

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This Digest is based on a publication the author wrote for the Oregon School Study Council: *Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom*, OSSC Bulletin Series, November/December 1994, 84 pages. Copies, at $11.00 each, are available from OSSC, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207.

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adept at facilitating positive, cooperative interactions among teaching team members.

The principal must ensure that all teachers feel supported and endeavor to maintain a sense of community within the school. Innovative efforts by small groups of teachers can threaten to split teaching staff into "pro" and "con" subgroups; avoiding intraschool strife can resemble a delicate tightrope walk. The principal must also deal with teachers unwilling or unable to make the transition. Finally, the principal must build support for multiage practices in the larger community.

Facilitating this transition requires sophisticated leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as personal characteristics such as patience and empathy. But most administrators receive little or no formal training in these skills. Those who possess them have generally learned them from experience, says Fullan (1991). Principals need opportunities for professional development and for interaction with colleagues who are facing similar challenges. They need support from district administrators as they develop these facilitative skills.

What Changes Should Be Made First?

Many educators mistakenly think multiage grouping is the first—or even the only—element that needs to be changed. But according to Anita McClanahan, early childhood education coordinator for the Oregon Department of Education, mixing ages isn't the magic key to improvement. "You have to change your methods of instruction. It's what we *do* with the groups of children that makes a difference" (Gaustad 1994).

Multiage *organization* facilitates the use of developmentally appropriate practices. It may help teachers focus on students' individual needs by introducing so much diversity that age-graded methods become unworkable (Miller). But teachers need opportunities to learn multiage instructional skills before classroom organization is changed.

Where to begin is much less important than beginning well. It is best to build solid knowledge and skills in one area, then gradually move into other curriculum areas and add additional strategies. Thematic teaching, hands-on math, cooperative learning, assessment using portfolios—any developmentally appropriate approach can be a good place to start. Most work equally well with single-age and multiage groups, and all ultimately connect and overlap.

Organization can also be changed gradually. Teachers of different grade levels often introduce multiage grouping by mingling their students for occasional projects. Grant and Johnson (1994) suggest *looping*, in which a teacher stays with a group of same-age children for two years, as a natural step toward teaching children of mixed ages. Some schools have successfully made the change in one great leap, but as Miller reports, this takes a heavy toll on teachers.

How Important Are Sufficient Time and Money?

Sufficient time and money are essential ingredients in creating and maintaining the multiage classroom. Multiage teaching takes years to master, and long-term staff development is expensive. So is hiring substitutes to enable teachers to attend workshops and plan changes with their colleagues. Other expenses include developmentally appropriate instructional materials for children, books and videotapes for adult learners, and outreach efforts to build community support.

Effective multiage teaching is more time-consuming than age-graded teaching. One group of Oregon teachers listed daily preparation time, weekly team planning time, monthly inservice and curriculum development time, and occasional staff development time as essential on an ongoing basis (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School 1994). Creative scheduling can free up some time, but hiring additional teachers or paraprofessionals will likely be necessary. Raths and Fanning (1993) also suggest teachers be given computers for the "incredibly labor-intensive" clerical aspects of qualitative assessment.

Simply telling teachers to "squeeze it all in somehow" is *not* an option. Teachers often donate immense amounts of unpaid personal time during implementation, but few can maintain such sacrifice on a long-term basis, nor should they be asked to. Administrators must accept the challenge of communicating to the public that educational quality cannot exist without adequate financial support, and enlist their aid in providing these resources.

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News & Notes

The January 1996 issue of *School Administrator* will focus on multi-age education. Single copies of this issue can be ordered from the American Association of School Administrators at 703-875-0748.

Multi-Age and More, a book by Colleen Politano and Anne Davis (Winnipeg, Canada: Peguis Publishers), offers a look at mixed-age grouping from two Canadian educators. The book contains reproducible masters for recordkeeping and an extensive bibliography. Contact Peguis Publishers Limited, 318 McDermot Avenue, Winnipeg, CANADA, R3A 0A2, for ordering information.

Multiage Q&A: 101 Practical Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions, written and compiled by Jim Grant, Bob Johnson, and Irv Richardson, is one of the latest offerings by Crystal Springs Books for mixed-age educators. ($12.95; Crystal Springs Books, PO Box 500, Peterborough, NH 03456; 1-800-321-0401 or fax 603-924-6688).

Encouraging Creativity in Early Childhood Classrooms, by Carolyn P. Edwards and Kay Springate; *Advertising in the Schools*, by Amy Aidman, and *Parent, Family, and Community Involvement in the Middle Grades*, by Barry Rutherford and Shelley H. Billig, are among the new digests available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary band Early Childhood Education; call 1-800-583-4135 to order free copies.

Q: What Are Our Options for Handling a Personality Clash between a Child and Her Teacher?

A: First, what is meant by a personality clash? Is such a perceived clash caused by who the teacher is, who the student is, or by teacher and student behaviors that consistently lead to conflict? Often behaviors that continually lead to conflict are labeled personality conflicts.

The teacher and student should become involved in a conflict resolution process to establish the issues and try to arrive at a solution which is of mutual benefit to both. If, after sincere effort at problem solving, it is apparent that the problem is going to continue, the school should consider changing the class placement of the student. Neither the child's best interest, nor the teacher's, is served by continuing a situation in which there is a continuous, unsolvable conflict.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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The MAGnet *is produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Editor
Diane E. McClellan, Ph.D.
Governors State University
University Park, Illinois

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Mixed-Age Grouping: Lifeline to Children At-Risk?

There is widespread agreement that the changes occurring in American society must be reflected in changes in the way schools are structured. It is particularly difficult for schools in low income neighborhoods to make the necessary or desired changes because they are doubly burdened with inadequate resources and a range of problems associated with poverty.

While parents in more affluent school districts are arguably more willing to take the risks of introducing innovative practices into their children's schooling, parents whose children are from impoverished neighborhoods and strained families often feel that they have little latitude to "experiment" with their child's future. And yet it is precisely because schools serving low-income children are in such desperate straits that certain innovations may be critical.

Larry Cuban (1989) of Stanford University argues that it is time to face the possibility that many of the problems in our inner city schools are directly related to the way that schools are structured. Cuban suggests that it is the design of the graded school that traps both children and teachers in a "web" of failure. Schools are too often structured as factories that are expected to take in uniform "materials" and spit out uniform "products." To heighten the school's efficiency, children are sorted, labeled, and tracked not only by age but also by finer and finer delineations of ability. If children fall behind it is assumed that it is because they, their parents, or their teachers are not trying hard enough. Periodically there is an outcry against the dismal state of affairs in our inner city schools, blame is assigned, and we all vow that we will try harder to fit square pegs into round holes. The multiage classroom, where children are grouped so that the age span is greater than one year, is central to the restructuring Cuban envisions. Although the multiage classroom is not a magic bullet that will solve the crisis in our inner city schools by itself, Cuban (1989) argues that no significant improvement will occur in the lives of the majority of at-risk children until dramatic and fundamental changes are made in the way schools are structured. In particular, sorting and grouping children by grade should give way to classrooms in which children care for, teach, and learn

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from each other, and where self-respect grows because children make real contributions to the class, to each other, and to the larger community.

Research provides some support for Cuban's ideas. Clear evidence from numerous studies supports the overall effectiveness of multiage classrooms in promoting positive academic and social outcomes (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990; McClellan, 1994). Of the approximately 18 studies that have looked specifically at low-income populations and multiage grouping, multiage emerges as a structure that, overall, promotes higher achievement scores, stronger social development, better self-concepts, and more positive attitudes toward school among at-risk students (Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

Estell Sprewer, principal at Victory Elementary School in Milwaukee, sees ample evidence of the effect that multiage or family grouping can have on children and learning. Victory Elementary, with the support of the teaching staff, adopted a multiage classroom structure seven years ago. Although the school serves predominantly low-income children, average daily attendance is between 93% and 95%. Sprewer points out that in a typical school, particularly an inner city school, kids begin to turn off to education by third grade. But at Victory, Sprewer feels that multiage grouping creates a learning environment that keeps kids involved, motivated, willing to take intellectual risks, and wanting to come to school. And she sees a direct correlation between the dispositions to come to school and to be involved and the children's achievement. Of particular note is the powerful effect the multiage structure seems to have in keeping males engaged by emphasizing projects with a clear meaning in the real world.

It becomes clear that multiage grouping in this context is far more than a new technique. It may be, as Cuban (1989) argues, of critical importance to the kind of fundamental reform that will bring a genuine life-giving learning community to a large proportion of our children.

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Mixed-Age Grouping and At-Risk Students: What Works—and What Doesn't

Hovda, Ric A.; And Others. 1996. *Creating Nongraded K-3 Classrooms.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

This book contains "teachers' stories and lessons learned" in Kentucky primary nongraded classrooms. Of special interest is Chapter 5, "Assessment in a Nongraded Primary Program: Discovering Children's Voices and Talents," in which the K-3 program in LaGrange, Kentucky is featured. Forty-five percent of students in the LaGrange K-3 program are designated "at-risk" because of their low socioeconomic level. This chapter focuses on the use of anecdotal reports and portfolio assessment to demonstrate at-risk students' personal

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The Contribution of Documentation to the Quality of Early Childhood Education

Lilian G. Katz and Sylvia C. Chard

The municipal preprimary schools in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia have been attracting worldwide attention for more than a decade. The reasons are many and have been discussed by a number of observers and visitors (see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, and Katz & Cesarone, 1994.) While interest in what is now called the "Reggio Emilia Approach" is focused on many of its impressive features, perhaps its unique contribution to early childhood education is the use of the documentation of children's experience as a standard part of classroom practice.

Documentation, in the forms of observation of children and extensive recordkeeping, has long been encouraged and practiced in many early childhood programs. However, compared to these practices in other traditions, documentation in Reggio Emilia focuses more intensively on children's experience, memories, thoughts, and ideas in the course of their work. Documentation practices in Reggio Emilia preprimary schools provide inspiring examples of the importance of displaying children's work with great care and attention to both the content and aesthetic aspects of the display.

Documentation typically includes samples of a child's work at several different stages of completion; photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children's discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents. Observations, transcriptions of tape-recordings, and photographs of children discussing their work can be included. Examples of children's work and written reflections on the processes in which the children engaged can be displayed in classrooms or hallways. The documents reveal how the children planned, carried out, and completed the displayed work.

It seems to us that high-quality documentation of children's work and ideas contributes to the quality of an early childhood program in at least six ways.

1. Enhancement of children's learning

Documentation can contribute to the extensiveness and depth of children's learning from their projects and other work. As Loris Malaguzzi points out, through documentation children "become even more curious, interested, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 63). The processes of preparing and displaying documentaries of the children's experience and effort provides a kind of debriefing or re-visiting of experience during which new understandings can be clarified, deepened, and strengthened. Observation of the children in Reggio Emilia preprimary classes indicates that children also learn from and are stimulated by each other's work in ways made visible through the documents displayed.

The documentation of the children's ideas, thoughts, feelings, and reports are also available to the children to record, preserve, and stimulate their memories of significant experiences, thereby further enhancing their learning related to the topics investigated. In addition, a display documenting the work of one child or of a group often encourages other children to become involved in a new topic and to adopt a representational technique they might use. For example, Susan and Leroy had just done a survey of which grocery stores in town are patronized by the families of their classmates. When Susan wanted to make a graph of her data, she asked Jeff about the graph displayed of his survey about the kinds of cereal their class ate for breakfast. With adult encouragement, children can be resourceful in seeking the advice of classmates when they know about the work done by the other children throughout the stages of a project.

2. Taking children's ideas and work seriously

Careful and attractive documentary displays can convey to children that their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously. These displays are not intended primarily to serve decorative or show-off purposes. For example, an important element in the project approach is the preparation of documents for display by which one group of children can let others in the class working on other aspects of the topic learn of their experience and findings. Taking children's work seriously in this way encourages in them the disposition to approach their work responsibly, with energy and commitment, showing both delight and satisfaction in the processes and the results.

3. Teacher planning and evaluation with children

One of the most salient features of project work is continuous planning based on the evaluation of work as it progresses. As the children undertake complex individual or small group collaborative tasks over a period of several days or weeks, the teachers examine the work each day and discuss with the children their ideas and the possibilities of new options for the following days. Planning decisions can be made on the basis of what individual or groups of children have found interesting, stimulating, puzzling, or challenging.

For example, in an early childhood center where the teachers engage weekly—and often daily as well—in review of children's work, they plan activities for the following week collaboratively, based in part on their review. Experiences and activities are not planned too far in advance, so that new strands of work can emerge and be documented. At the end of the morning or of the school day, when the children are no longer present, teachers can reflect on the work in progress and the discussion which surrounded it, and consider possible new directions the work might take and what suggestions might support the work. They can also become aware of the participation and development of each individual child. This awareness enables the teacher to optimize the children's chances of representing their ideas in interesting and satisfying ways. When teachers and children plan together with openness to each other's ideas, the activity is likely to be undertaken with greater interest and representational skill than if the child had planned alone, or the teacher had been unaware of the challenge facing the child. The documentation provides a kind of ongoing planning and evaluation that can be done by the team of adults who work with the children.

4. Parent appreciation and participation

Documentation makes it possible for parents to become intimately and deeply aware of their children's experience in the school. As Malaguzzi points out, documentation "introduces parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes their expectations. They reexamine their assumptions about their parenting roles and their views about the experience their children are living, and take a new and more inquisitive approach toward the whole school experience" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 64).

Parents' comments on children's work can also contribute to the value of documentation. Through learning about the work in which their children are engaged, parents may be able to contribute ideas for field experiences which the teachers may not have thought of, especially when parents can offer practical help in gaining access to a field site or relevant expert. In one classroom a parent brought in a turkey from her uncle's farm after she learned that the teacher was helping the children grasp what a real live turkey looked like.

The opportunity to examine the documentation of a project in progress can also help parents to think of ways they might contribute their time and energy in their child's classroom. There are many ways parents can be involved: listening to children's intentions, helping them find the materials they need, making suggestions, helping children write their ideas, offering assistance in finding and reading books, and measuring or counting things in the context of the project.

5. Teacher research and process awareness

Documentation is an important kind of teacher research, sharpening and focusing teachers' attention on children's plans and understandings and on their own role in children's experiences. As teachers examine the children's work and prepare the documentation of it, their own understanding of children's development and insight into their learning is deepened in ways not likely to occur from inspecting test results. Documentation provides a basis for the modification and adjustment of teaching strategies, and a source of ideas for new strategies, while deepening teachers' awareness of each child's progress. On the basis of the rich data made available through documentation, teachers are able to make informed decisions about appropriate ways to support each child's development and learning.

The final product of a child's hard work rarely makes possible an appreciation of the false starts and persistent efforts entailed in the work. By examining the documented steps taken by children during their investigations and representational work, teachers and parents can appreciate the uniqueness of each child's construction of his or her experience, and the ways group efforts contribute to their learning.

6. Children's learning made visible

Of particular relevance to American educators, documentation provides information about children's learning and progress that cannot be demonstrated by the formal standardized tests and checklists we commonly employ. While U.S. teachers often gain important information and insight from their own first-hand observations of children, documentation of the children's work in a wide variety of media provides compelling public evidence of the intellectual powers of young children that is not available in any other way that we know of.

Conclusion

The powerful contribution of documentation in these six ways is possible because children are engaged in absorbing, complex, interesting projects worthy of documentation. If, as is common in many traditional classrooms around the world, a large proportion of children's time is devoted to making the same pictures with the same materials about the same topic on the same day in the same way, there would be little to document which would intrigue parents and provide rich content for teacher-parent or child-parent discussion!

For More Information

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growth and learning.

> Schroeder, Jean S. 1994. Finding Value in Literature Discussion. *Teaching and Change* 1(2, Winter): 154-69. EJ488765

Study examined whether literature discussion groups would offer students worthwhile opportunities, noting how discussion could be evaluated using teacher and student documentation. Eighteen high-risk students were audiotaped discussing stories. Audiotaping proved highly successful. Children were able to take responsibility in the evaluation process when given the opportunity.

> Robinson, Tracy. 1992. Transforming At-Risk Educational Practices by Understanding and Appreciating Differences. *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* 27(2, December): 84-95. EJ455458.

Asserts that, in addition to children's aptitude levels, teacher and counselor attitudes and quality of school climate are critical ingredients in determining what works with at-risk children. Seeks to illustrate that expectations, either escalated or diminished because of race, gender, or class, represent at-risk educational practices. Examines meaning of at-risk terminology and suggests strategies for changing at-risk educational practices.

Mixed-Age Grouping on the Web!

Many sites on the World Wide Web offer significant information for teachers interested in multiage education.

http://www.chimacum.wednet.edu/elementary/Resources.html

This site is managed by Russell Yates and contains resources for multiage teachers. The home page links to discussions and descriptions of mixed-age grouping in theory and practice. Examples are included of parent communications, including a multiage handout and a summary of research, a tentative daily schedule, and a link to the multiage discussion group on the Internet (featured in an earlier issue of ***The MAGnet***). Also linked on this site is information on a mixed-age (grades 2-3) program featuring student work and teacher resources.

http://www.ualberta.ca/~schard/projects.htm

> The focus of this site is on the project approach to learning. Managed by Sylvia Chard at the University of Alberta in Canada, this site features two projects undertaken by a mixed-age group of 3- to 5-year-olds (a cafeteria project and a hospital project). This site also contains a discussion of the phases of a project and encourages teachers to submit accounts of projects they have used successfully with students for inclusion on the Web site. A link is also included to the PROJECTS-L listserv/discussion group on the Internet.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

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Mixed-Age Grouping Helps Children Develop Social Skills and a Sense of Belonging

Diane McClellan and Susan Kinsey

Interest in the potential impact of age grouping children on social competence is currently the focus of renewed interest from teachers, principals, and researchers (Mason and Burns, 1996; Veenman, 1996; Katz et al., 1990).

Researchers are exploring the development of social skills in classes where children of at least a two-year age span are grouped in a single classroom and are encouraged to share experiences involving intellectual, academic, and social skills (Katz et al., 1990).

Preliminary results of an investigation just completed by McClellan and Kinsey suggest that the mixed-age classroom may indeed encourage positive social behavior and relationships between children, and reduce aggressive and disruptive behavior. In the course of our investigation, 649 children were rated by their teachers on their social behavior in mixed- and same-age classrooms. Many other variables in addition to participation in mixed or same-age classrooms were also taken into account, such as the child's sex and socioeconomic status, the gender and experience, the number of children in a classroom, and the degree to which children participated in groups and interest centers throughout the day. In this way, we were able to control for these factors and get a clearer picture of how important the classroom age-range was in predicting his or her social behavior. In addition, we pre-tested children at the kindergarten level (all in same-age classrooms) to check for pre-existing differences in childen that might predispose their inclusion in a mixed- or same-age classroom, and found none.

The three categories of social behavior we focused on were prosocial behaviors (nurturing others, sharing, etc.), friendship behaviors, and levels of aggression. In all three areas, there was a strong and significant difference between children participating in same- or mixed-age classrooms. In fact, the only other variable that was more predictive of children's social behavior in these

categories was gender. For example, boys were judged by their teachers to be more aggressive, less prosocial than girls, and about the same as girls in friendship behaviors, no matter what the age range of their classrooms.

Children of both sexes participating in mixed-age classrooms were significantly less likely to behave aggressively toward other children ($p < .001$) or to engage in negative behavior such as tattling on other children ($p < .000$). The mixed-age classroom was also more predictive of a classroom atmosphere where all children were included and found friendship opportunities. Fewer children were isolated or rejected by their peers ($p < .001$). Finally, participation in a mixed-age classroom was more predictive of higher levels of prosocial behavior among children of both sexes ($p < .000$). Children seemed to watch out for each other, to be more willing to include a less popular child in play or work groups, and to ask one another for help with a problem.

Children seemed to . . . be more willing to include a less popular child in play or work groups, and to ask one another for help with a problem.

There may be many reasons why a mixed-age classroom is conducive to positive social behaviors. Consistency over time in relationships between teachers, children, and parents is viewed as one of the most significant strengths of the mixed-age approach because it encourages greater depth in children's social, academic, and intellectual development. The concept of the classroom as a "family" is encouraged, leading to expansion of the roles of nurturing and commitment on the part of both students and teacher (Marshak, 1994).

As in all approaches to the education of children, the quality of implementation is key in a mixed-age classroom. Effective implementation of a multiage approach to education extends beyond simply mixing children of different ages, to allow for the development of social skills as the teacher encourages cross-age interactions through peer tutoring and shared discovery. Social competence develops for older children out of their role as teachers and nurturers, and for younger children out of their opportunity to observe and model the behavior of their older classmates (Katz et al., 1990; Ridgway and Lawton, 1965).

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Editor's Note: Diane McClellan is a professor of early childhood education at Governors State University in Illinois, and editor of ***The MAGnet;*** *Susan Kinsey is a doctoral student at Erikson Institute in Chicago.*

Special Needs Children and Mixed-Age Grouping

Ann-Marie Clark

One of the best things that has happened for special needs children since the passage of P.L. 94-142 is the implementation of mixed-age grouping. Why? Because mixed-age grouping creates classrooms where individual differences are more likely to be accepted and, more importantly, expected. Children with special needs can find a role suited to their strengths in a well-run mixed-age, mixed-ability, cooperative learning group. Their opportunities for successful integration into the class are much greater than in single-age or similar-ability classrooms.

Three strategies that are especially effective in the mixed-age inclusionary classroom are (1) preteaching, (2) cross-age tutoring, and (3) the Project Approach.

Preteaching. Preteaching key concepts to students who need extra time and repetition to facilitate learning can be done by practicing important vocabulary and concepts prior to classroom use of them, and then putting these students in leadership roles in activities related to the new knowledge (Young and Boyle, 1994). Rehearsing key questions and answers related to the topic with special needs students can also provide them with more language and a better understanding of an upcoming activity. Preteaching in a mixed age group will require extra planning by the teacher, but the results are worth it.

Cross-age tutoring. One of the benefits of mixed-age grouping is that younger children can learn from older ones. A special needs student in third grade, for example, can help beginning readers practice reading—and can do so effectively—after being provided with some training in how to tutor younger children. In so doing, skills and dispositions to read are strengthened for both children.

The Project Approach. Preteaching and the Project Approach are a natural pairing in the inclusive classroom. Katz and Chard (1989) stress guiding children to choose for project work a phenomenon, object, or event that is readily available in children's immediate environment and with which children already have some first-hand experience—a strategy that suits the special needs of many children. Special needs students can be provided with extra activities that can be done in preparation for class discussions, such as preparing interview questions for invited experts or for field trips, and presenting these questions when the class begins its discussion about what to ask the experts.

In addition to the instructional opportunities these strategies offer to teachers working with special needs children,

The mixed-age class offers many opportunities for speech and language pathologists and other professionals to provide meaningful therapy in the context of children creating models or other representations of their projects.

project work in mixed-age classes offers many opportunities for speech and language pathologists and other professionals to provide meaningful therapy in the context of children creating models or other representations of their observations and findings. The speech and language pathologist, for example, can get a rich base of language samples in this way. She or he

can also help less verbal students who may be struggling with what to say for the closure presentation by working with several students in a small-group session.

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Editor's Note: Ann-Marie Clark taught special education in Kentucky schools for 20 years. She is now a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Addressing the Potential Risks of Mixed-Age Grouping

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.

Whenever changes in practice or curriculum are being considered, their potential risks as well as advantages merit consideration and open discussion. What might be some potential risks of mixed-age grouping, and what can be done to minimize them?

• ***Older children in a class may not be sufficiently challenged.***

In any classroom grouping, there is the potential risk that some children will not be challenged. Teachers always have responsibility for monitoring, observing, and documenting each child's experience to ensure sufficient challenge for all.

• ***Older children may be exploited by younger ones' persistent calls for help.***

In any classroom, there is a risk that more-able children will be called upon for assistance too often by less-able ones. Teachers can help by teaching the older children how to say things like "I can't help you right now, but I will as soon as I have finished." The ability to say something like that gracefully is a life skill not on anyone's state test!

• ***Older children may become overbearing or bossy with younger ones. Such behavior can be observed in any class and may not be related to age differences.***

The teacher can help by indicating that bossy behavior is inappropriate, and that all members of the class are to be treated respectfully. She can also help them to recall their own earlier experiences of being in similar situations and thus arouse their capacities for empathy.

• ***Younger children might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by their larger and more experienced classmates.***

Such feelings can occur in some children in any classroom, regardless of age distribution. The teacher can help by offering strategies to use by which younger children can be assertive, and by encouraging the more powerful and competent members of the group to make allowances for those with less experience—again, reminding them of their own previous experiences of the same kind.

• ***Younger children may become acutely aware of their own limitations compared to older classmates.***

The role of adults in such situations is to encourage younger children to accept their limitations gracefully by reassuring them that in the not too distant future, they too will be able to engage in the envied activity.

• ***Older children may assume that since younger children cannot do some things for***

themselves, the older ones must take over the situation.

> Teachers can help by encouraging older children to wait and to give the younger children instructions, and to take pleasure in watching younger children's competencies grow.

It is a good idea for teachers and administrators to let parents know that they are aware of the potential risks of mixed-age grouping, and that they are on guard against them. Teachers can be watchful for developing problems and keep risks at a minimal level. Mixed-age grouping is not a magic formula for life's problems. Rather, any arrangement of groups of children has plusses and minuses.

Project Approach Catalog Now Available

ERIC/EECE has published a description of 11 high-quality projects conducted by primary educators in 3 different countries, edited by Judy Harris Helm. Prefaced with short articles about implementing the Project Approach, the project descriptions (including photographs and some pictures of children's work) are a major portion of the document. Copies are available for $5 plus $1.50 shipping and handling. Credit card orders are accepted and can be placed by calling ERIC/ EECE's toll-free number: 1-800-583-4135.

What's New on Mixed-Age Grouping

Books

Grant, Jim; And Others. 1996. *The Looping Handbook: Teachers and Students Progressing Together.* Peterborough, NH: Crystal Springs Books. Available From: Crystal Springs Books, P.O. Box 500, Ten Sharon Road, Peterborough, NH 03458 (Item No. 4857, $24.95, plus $4.75 shipping and handling. Discount on quantity orders). PS 024 547; 149p.

Looping (a process whereby a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year) is becoming popular as teachers and administrators find that this simple idea has a profound effect on their students. This handbook describes the many benefits of looping and describes how to get started. The handbook contains interviews with looping teachers and principals from six schools, as well as samples from a looping teacher's parent handbook and a complete outline of her first- and second-grade looping curriculum.

Heckman, Paul E. 1996. *The Courage To Change: Stories from Successful School Reform.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc. Available From: Corwin Press, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320 (e-mail: order@corwin.sagepub.com). ISBN: 0-8039-6330-0. 214p. ED 390 176.

This book describes an action-research effort known as the Educational and Community Change (ECC) Project. Much of the book was written by teachers and the principal at Ochoa Elementary School in South Tucson, Arizona, which implemented the ECC project in 1990. Of special interest to those implementing mixed-age grouping is chapter 4, which describes the expected and unexpected results of mixing Spanish-dominant and English-dominant children, and chapter 5, which describes outcomes of teaching in multiage/grade classrooms.

Banks, Janet Caudill. 1995. *Creating the Multi-Age Classroom: Organization, Curriculum, Instructional Strategies and Assessment for the Multi-Age Classroom Plus Considerations for Getting Started and Techniques for Classroom Management*. Revised Edition. Available From: CATS Publications, 8633 233rd Place S.W., Edmonds, WA 98026-8646 ($19.95). ISBN: 1-886753-03-2. 145p. ED 394 714.

Intended for teachers who have asked for information on how to manage a multiage classroom, this book outlines the ideal classroom as it exists when all of the multi-age components are put in place. Discussed are creating the multiage classroom, the advantages and principles of multiage instruction, overviews of classroom organization, instructional strategies, curriculum, assessment and evaluation, and getting started.

Fredenburg, Aldene, Ed. 1995. *Teaching for Success: Strengthening Child-Centered Classrooms*. 8th Edition Resource Book. Peterborough, NH: Society for Developmental Education. Available From: Society for Developmental Education, Ten Sharon Road, P.O. Box 577, Peterborough, NH 03458 ($24.95). ISBN: 1-884548-02-4. 334p. ED 390 545.

This resource book, compiled by the Society for Developmental Education (SDE), provides articles and suggestions for strengthening child-centered education. The seven sections of the book are as follows: (1) "For Discussion," including debates on class size and inclusion; (2) "Readiness/ Kindergarten," covering issues such as the all-day kindergarten and developmental diversity; (3) "Learning Styles/Multiple Intelligences"; (4) "Multiage Education," including a discussion of the nongraded classroom; (5) "Integrated Curriculum"; (6) "Assessment"; and (7) "Teaching All Children," focusing on collaboration, special needs children, and acceptance.

Journal Articles

Jeanroy, Don. 1996, January. The Results of Multiage Grouping. *School Administrator*, 53(1): 18-19. EJ 517 825.

Facing an ever-increasing student retention rate, staff at a Washington elementary school implemented a multiage program. Teachers received considerable training but experienced burnout the first year. Four years later, retention is down, test scores and attendance are up, discipline referrals have decreased, teacher turnover is low, and parents are supportive.

Miller, Bruce A. 1996, January. A Basic Understanding of Multiage Grouping. *School Administrator*, 53(1): 12-17. EJ 517 824.

State mandates in Kentucky, Oregon, Mississippi, and Tennessee have raised questions concerning multiage grouping's viability. Some educators are implementing multiage classrooms and schools with insufficient forethought, planning, and stakeholder participation. A recent study underlines the importance of teacher readiness, parental involvement, and collaborative planning. Sidebars highlight resources and Robert H. Anderson's pioneering efforts.

Privett, Nawanna B. 1996, January. Without Fear of Failure: The Attributes of an Ungraded Primary School. *School Administrator*, 53(1), 6-11. EJ 517 823.

Kentucky's ungraded Primary School Program is defined by seven critical attributes: developmentally appropriate educational practices, multiage/multiability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessments, qualitative reporting methods, professional

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teamwork, and positive parent involvement. This article explains these attributes, highlights implementation challenges, and offers suggestions for interested administrators. Sidebars define terminology and list resources.

Veenman, Simon. 1995, Winter. Cognitive and Noncognitive Effects of Multigrade and Multi-Age Classes: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 65(4): 319-81. EJ 522 378.

This article reviews the best evidence concerning the cognitive and noncognitive effects of multigrade (students of more than one grade taught by one teacher) and multiage (students grouped for expected benefits) classrooms. Studies of noncognitive, cognitive, and achievement effects reveal no adverse effects of learning in such classrooms.

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ERIC/EECE News

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education is moving! Our new address, as of January 9, 1997, will be:

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Telephone and fax numbers, as well as electronic mail addresses, will remain the same (see last page of this newsletter).

ERIC/EECE also has published several new ERIC Digests since the last issue of ***The MAGnet***:

- *Working with Perfectionist Students*, by Jere Brophy.
- *Working with Shy Students*, by Jere Brophy.
- *Father/Male Involvement in Early Childhood Programs*, by Brent A. McBride and Thomas R. Rane.
- *Action Research in Early Childhood Education*, by Eileen Borgia and Dorothy Schuler.
- *Preventing and Resolving Differences between Parents and Teachers*, by Lilian G. Katz, and others.
- *Grandparents as Parents: A Primer for Schools*, by Dianne Rothenberg.

These Digests are available at no cost by calling 1-800-583-4135. It's hard to believe that this issue marks the beginning of the fifth year of ***The MAGnet***. We thank all our subscribers for your continued support.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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***The MAGnet** is produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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Addressing the Risk of Bullying in Mixed-Age Groups

Diane E. McClellan

One of the questions that concerns teachers and parents about mixed-age grouping is the possibility that older children will dominate or bully younger children. Unfortunately, this worry is probably realistic, and teachers should be alert (as in any classroom) for signs that a younger or less assertive child is suffering from another child's aggression. Bullying extends beyond the physical aggression or threat of aggression of one child against another and includes verbal and psychological threats, taunting, and harassment of a child by others (Viadero, 1997). Bullying can sometimes be quite subtle and, especially when adults are present, not always obvious.

Research suggests that at least 15% of all children admit that they have felt bullied or feel bullied at school (Olweus, 1993). However, particular children tend to be singled out by peers as the victims of repeated bullying (Olweus, 1993), suggesting that teachers need to be concerned not only with helping the bully change his or her behavior but also with helping victims develop social habits that will discourage their status as repeated targets of bullying.

The complete absence of the expression of aggression, particularly playful aggression, in children's relationships is probably not desirable (Pellegrini, 1989); however, research suggests that levels of aggression in many groups of children far exceed what is considered optimal (Magid & McKelvey, 1987; Zigler, Taussig, & Black, 1992). Given the relatively high incidence of aggression among many young children, is it possible that mixing children in ages may give bullies more opportunity to victimize younger or more defenseless children?

In reviewing the research on this issue, quite the opposite seems to be the more likely outcome—that is, children in mixed-age groups may be less likely to be bullied or to bully other children. Further, it has been argued that the concentration of same-age peers is a major factor in the extremely high incidence of aggressive, antisocial, and destructive acts in United States society (McClellan, 1994). In an international study, Whiting and Whiting (1975) found that children were more likely to behave aggressively with same-age peers than with peers who differed

in age by a year or more. McClellan (1994) compared teacher ratings of aggression levels in 34 mixed- and same-age preschool classrooms and found significantly higher levels of aggression in the same-age classrooms. In a more recent study with another sample of children, McClellan and Kinsey (1997) compared 649 children in first- through fifth-grade classrooms. Again, children in mixed-age classrooms were significantly less likely to be judged by their teachers as verbally and physically aggressive with classmates during work or play than those in same-age classes. One year after the initial study, when all children had returned to same-age classrooms, the children who had previously participated in the mixed-age classrooms were still significantly less likely to behave aggressively (McClellan & Kinsey, 1997).

In an investigation of particular importance in weighing the likelihood that children in mixed-age classes might tend to bully their younger classmates, Whiting and Edwards (1977) distinguished between the notion of aggressive versus dominant behaviors. They found that older children did tend to dominate their younger peers, but they were also very nurturing. Dominance, in other words, usually included nurturance and prosocial behavior. Pure aggression, on the other hand, was seen more frequently among same-age peers in a constellation of behaviors that included sociableness, playfulness, rough-and-tumble play, teasing, and insulting.

It is likely that dominance is a behavior pattern that is distinct from, yet related to, aggression and bullying in all primates (Goodall, 1986). One way various animal groups, including humans, allow for the expression of aggressive impulses yet maintain order is through the establishment of dominance hierarchies (Goodall, 1986; Maccoby, 1980). Established hierarchies serve at least two purposes. First, they reduce the amount of fighting among individuals because individual group members usually know in advance whom they may safely challenge and whom they had better leave alone (Maccoby, 1980). Second, older respected dominant individuals protect younger individuals from the threats and abuse of others (Goodall, 1986).

For example, Stright and French (1988) observed the leadership behavior of same-age and mixed-age groups of children 7 to 11 years old who were given the task of accurately ordering sets of pictures. Older children in the mixed-age groups demonstrated sophisticated leadership capacities by soliciting individual and group preferences and organizing the statements and behaviors of the younger children (offering the younger children support or psychological protection). The leadership of the older children was skillfully facilitative rather than crudely dominating or bullying. Others have reported similar findings (Graziano, French, Brownell, & Hartup, 1976; French, Waas, Stright, & Baker, 1986).

A primary factor in the establishment of hierarchies among adult male primates is age (Goodall, 1986). Challenges may be more frequent and stable hierarchies more difficult to maintain if many of the individuals in a social group are close to the same age, size, or physical ability. The process of establishing a dominance hierarchy in a same-age group may be a far more difficult task than in a mixed-age group, and it may thus place a good deal more competitive stress on the group members. In addition, the psychological toll for low status in the hierarchy of a same-age group may also be greater than in a mixed-age group. To be the low-status child in the pecking order in a group of 5- to 7-year-olds may be at times uncomfortable, but the child knows that in two years her place in the hierarchy will change and that in the meantime she is likely to be protected from harsher and more mean-spirited attempts at dominance. The child in the same-age class, on the other hand, may be more likely to regard her status as a stable reflection of her worth and acceptance.

This interpretation is borne out by evidence that children prefer to be taught by children older than themselves rather than children their same age, and that they prefer to teach children younger than themselves (Allen & Feldman, 1976; French, 1984; McClellan, 1994). Again, this preference may be, in part, because older children can more comfortably establish dominance over younger children, and, further, younger children can more

comfortably yield to the dominance of an older child without the loss of face or feeling of vulnerability that might accompany submission to a same-age peer.

In summary, it has been suggested that the concentration of same-age peer groups in parts of the social fabric of the United States contributes to aggressive and antisocial behavior (McClellan, 1994; McClellan & Kinsey, 1997). One way many animals, including humans, maintain order is through the establishment of dominance hierarchies (Maccoby, 1980). However, dominance hierarchies may be more difficult to maintain if too many of the individuals in a social group are close to the same age or ability. Mixed-age grouping thus may foster leadership behavior among children that is more confident, skilled, responsible, and nurturing than leadership efforts exclusively among same-age peers.

It is likely, however, that the process of using the mixed-age setting to help the older children in the classroom develop positive leadership skills and abstain from bullying is not always automatic and must be carefully monitored and facilitated by the teacher (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990). Awareness of the pervasiveness and seriousness of bullying in school settings has increased dramatically in recent years, and several resources have been developed to help teachers, no matter what the grouping pattern of their classroom, understand and take steps to bully-proof their classrooms (see Olweus, 1993; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1996).

Editor's Note: The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education has recently published a digest on bullying: Bullying in Schools *by Ron Banks. To order this free digest, contact ERIC/EECE at 800-583-4135.*

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PASSAGES: Multi-Age Middle School Program for Over-Age, At-Risk Students

Glenn Douglas

The Program for Adolescent Students Seeking Age Grade Equivalent Status (PASSAGES) consists of a two-teacher, multi-age cluster (or team) at Pulaski Middle School, in New Britain, Connecticut. Some 40 students are enrolled in the program, having been selected from a pool of over-age sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders who evidenced a pattern of academic difficulties. The program began in the fall of 1996, and it is anticipated that most students enrolled in PASSAGES will take two years instead of three to pass through middle school, rejoining their same-age peers in ninth grade.

In the school district, the cumulative effects of retention in grade, starting in kindergarten, build to the point where on the threshold of middle school almost one-half of sixth-graders are over-age. These over-age middle-school students are at risk of further retention: a full two-thirds of ninth graders were over-age in the 1994-95 school year.

Evidence leads to the conclusion that a significant number of dropouts are from the ranks of the over-age students. This hypothesis is consistent with studies showing that, for students who have been retained, the likelihood of dropping out of school increases substantially (Hahn, 1987; Schulz et al., 1986; Roderick, 1994, 1995). Additionally, the repetition of a grade rarely helps children to overcome difficulties in meeting grade achievement expectations (Katz, 1992).

Students who are behind academically have typically attended remediation classes. The PASSAGES approach is to *accelerate*, rather than remediate. This premise was behind the "Accelerated Schools" program developed by Levin (1993). PASSAGES focuses on real-life situations using cooperative learning (Guido, 1992). The goal is not to have "fast-track" classes, but rather to enrich learning through higher expectations and realistic assignments (Keller, 1995).

The PASSAGES cluster is an example of multi-age grouping (Katz, 1992). Students are not grouped according to ability but are taught in heterogeneous classes. Teaching techniques that are recommended in the literature to help in dropout prevention are applied. These techniques include a heavy emphasis on guidance or counseling (Lieberman, 1989); links with community agencies (Nelson, 1985); avoidance of rote or passive learning; high expectations (Bhaerman & Kopp, 1988); assessment tied to instructional objectives (Oakes, 1987); competency-based curriculum; peer tutoring; involvement of parents and community organizations; mentorships; and counseling (Hahn, 1987).

Evidence suggests that minority students perceive that they have to "act white" in order to succeed (Erickson, 1987). Cordeiro and Carspecken (1993) found that 20 successful Hispanic students adopted aspects of the dominant culture. In other words, their success was at least partially due to "acting white." Erickson (1987) states that "the politics of legitimacy, trust, and assent seem to be the most fundamental factors in school success" (p. 354). He argues that schools need to make special efforts to be "culturally responsive," with the goal of reducing the pressure that minorities feel to "act white" in order to achieve school success, with its concomitant feeling of disloyalty to their own cultures. Through the use of multicultural literature and interdisciplinary units, teachers in the PASSAGES cluster are working to dispel any perception

that minority students (who constitute a majority in the cluster) may have about having to "act white" in order to succeed.

Preliminary evidence suggests that students in PASSAGES have improved feelings of self-efficacy, particularly in the area of problem solving. It is hoped that this improvement will eventually translate into a lower dropout rate in the district.

For information on PASSAGES, contact Glenn Douglas at Pulaski Middle School, 757 Farmington Ave., New Britain, CT 06053; phone: 860-225-7665.

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New ERIC/EECE Electronic Journal

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE) will begin publication of the first refereed electronic journal in early childhood education in 1998.

Early Childhood Research and Practice (*ECRP*) will feature articles related to the growth, learning, development, care, and education of children from birth to age 8. *ECRP* will emphasize articles reporting on practice-related research and development, and on issues related to practice, parent participation, and policy. *ECRP* will also feature a regular column on mixed-age grouping; thus, the *MAGnet Newsletter* will cease publication with the Spring/Summer 1998 issue.

For additional information and for *ECRP* author guidelines, contact ERIC/EECE: phone: 217-333-1386; toll-free: 800-583-4135; email: *ericeece@uiuc.edu*.

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The MAGnet Newsletter

On Mixed-Age Grouping in Preschool and Elementary Settings

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The MAGnet is produced by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Closing Thoughts

Diane McClellan

For six years, the MAGnet has been reaching out to schools, administrators, teachers, and parents around the country to discuss the complexities of creating classrooms in which preschool and primary children of varying ages are mixed to become a community of learners. With the creation of a new electronic journal that will deal with many of these same concerns, we now move these discussions to a broader context of related issues.

In this regard, an interesting aspect of mixed-age grouping is to consider what it is, and what it is not. Teachers of mixed-age classes, professors, and researchers often speak of mixed-age grouping as one of a constellation of learning/teaching approaches that includes, among other things, a decentralized classroom with learning centers and ample opportunities for individual and cooperative learning. Ideas drawn from Reggio Emilia and the Project Approach as developed by Katz and Chard (*Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach,* Ablex, 1989) are also often included in discussions of mixed-age learning. Social development is high among the concerns of advocates of mixed-age grouping and is usually valued and promoted as a critical aspect of cognitive as well as social and moral development. And, of course, the conscious use of children's interaction in mixed-age groups and dyads to promote desired educational outcomes is central when discussing the concept of mixed-age grouping.

It might be argued, however, that mixed-age grouping is really only one aspect of this constellation of approaches to education and as such deserves to be explored as a separate entity (as do all of the other variables mentioned above). Is it mixed-age grouping itself that brings about the wonderful educational environments many of us have observed? Some of us might respond that mixed-age grouping, by itself, is a necessary but not sufficient factor in creating the kinds of classrooms we know foster children's learning.

So, periodic articles on mixed-age grouping will now become a part of a broader range of articles included in a new Internet journal intended to explore issues of research and practice in the field. We invite you to participate—as a subscriber or author—to the development of the new journal, called *Early Childhood Research and Practice.* (See article on page 5.)

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Mixed-Age Sociodramatic Play: A Method for Facilitating Standard English Usage?

Sharifa Townsend

Some African American children, like children of other ethnic groups, speak a dialect—that is, they use variations of the English language that are rooted in their particular sociocultural heritage. "Black English" (BE) is a term that has been used to describe the cultural dialect that is spoken by many African Americans; it is a dialect made up of an English vocabulary and an African language structure and grammar (Winters, 1993). Linguists have chronicled the historical development of Black English and confirm that it is a legitimate and separate linguistic system, historically connected to what is considered to be mainstream American English, more commonly called "standard English" (SE). BE speakers' speech contains some or all of 15 to 20 syntactic variations that have been identified by linguists (Scales & Brown, 1981). Not all African Americans speak BE, and some may do so only to varying degrees. Other BE speakers may exhibit only a few of the features of the dialect, while others may have most of its features in their oral repertoires (Dillard, 1972).

Over the past several years, BE has been referred to as "Ebonics" in contexts that have led to some deep misunderstandings of this system of English usage. However, the legitimizing of BE as a "language" should not be the central issue when considering the education of children whose predominant language is BE. Rather, the most important consideration is that BE differs from SE and, like some other dialects, is not accepted by mainstream society. Lack of proficiency in SE interferes with communication and educational outcomes for African American children. Most African American students find it useful to be able to "switch" to the dominant culture's linguistic system and to speak proficient SE for the purposes of economic, social, and academic success when functioning outside the Black community.

All languages and dialects are learned by interacting with proficient speakers. Play with a strong language component offers a natural setting in which children can learn linguistic systems and the functions of a language (Naremore & Hopper, 1990). Because language structure is learned during the early childhood years, and sociodramatic play is a primary feature of children's behavior in the early childhood years, exposure to SE during this critical period can be useful for Black English speakers in the acquisition of SE. Brown (1979) emphasized the need for "active" language instruction when teaching a second language and discussed the usefulness of having children use the English language during natural interactions. Teaching and helping during sociodramatic play, compared to contrived learning situations, appear to provide a natural context in which second-language learning can take place (McLoyd, 1979). Sociodramatic play provides a context in which children have opportunities to take risks, explore, and practice a second language, and to receive feedback in a nonthreatening environment.

It has been my observation that African American children who speak BE are indeed capable of "switching" linguistic styles during sociodramatic play. I have noted that the children acted out my role as the teacher, spoke as I spoke, and attempted to use SE. They had obviously noted the linguistic nuances of my speech and continued to improve on the usage of the SE forms with increasing opportunities to practice in the non-threatening environment of the classroom. I decided to capitalize on these "teachable moments" by routinely encouraging the children to be the "teacher" during routine "Hello Time" activities (e.g., reviewing the calendar or facilitating interest area/job chart selection).

Mixed-age classrooms can be rich contexts for children's development of SE. Research suggests that children are more likely to try out more varied roles and language with peers than with adults (Kuczaj, 1983). Further, Vygotsky (1978) notes that the social origins of higher mental functions include more experienced peers, who are often important to

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• Major Publications

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☐ ***A to Z: The Early Childhood Educator's Guide to the Internet***, by the ERIC/EECE staff, with an introduction by Bonnie Blagojevic (Rev. 1998). Cat. #214, Loose-leaf pages only, $10. ☐$15 with binder.
☐ ***The Project Approach Catalog***, by the Project Approach Study Group (1996). Judy Helm, ed. Cat. #218, $5.
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the development of children's increased language facility. It is possible that older children or children more experienced in the use of SE may provide important models in the mixed-age classroom for BE speakers. Research supports the likelihood that children do contribute differentially in social exchanges. When 5-year-olds were paired with 3-year-olds, the older child served as director, teacher, and helper, and modeled appropriate linguistic markers to accompany their demonstrations. The younger child increased verbal imitation of the older child.

In addition, other research (Brown & Palincsar, 1989) suggests that complex social interaction and verbal communication are more frequent for a young child paired with an older peer than for a young child paired with a same-age peer. Mixed-age sociodramatic play thus provides a rich context for African American children to acquire standard English. In addition to modeling SE, teachers of mixed-age groups may also want to encourage children experienced in SE to play with children who are BE speakers.

Many questions related to the African American child's acquisition of SE remain to be explored. Because of the complexities of BE and our lack of knowledge about how to facilitate the user's acquisition of standard English, studies that focus on sociodramatic play, especially in terms of how it facilitates SE language acquisition for BE-speaking preschoolers, are needed. Exploration of how an older, more experienced, or SE-proficient peer can support the child who speaks BE in learning to use SE is also warranted. Research on the processes of language acquisition and classroom interaction needed to support the African American child's language growth would be useful to teachers. Research on the child's ability to acquire standard English without diminishing cultural identity is also needed.

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The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE) will begin publication of the first refereed Internet journal in early childhood education in 1998.

Early Childhood Research and Practice (*ECRP*) will feature articles related to the growth, learning, development, care, and education of children from birth to age 8. *ECRP* will emphasize articles reporting on practice-related research and development, and on issues related to practice, parent participation, and policy. *ECRP* will also feature a regular column on mixed-age grouping; thus, the *MAGnet Newsletter* will cease publication with this (Fall/Winter 1997) issue.

For additional information and for *ECRP* author guidelines, contact ERIC/EECE: phone: 217-333-1386; toll-free: 800-583-4135; email: *ericeece@uiuc.edu.*

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